スレイヤーズすまっしゅ!

5 恋せよオトメ

神坂一
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Slayers Smash. 4:
The Resurrected King
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Translator Foreword:

This series has been around over 30 years and has over 30 volumes; no one has successfully translated it; It is abandoned and likely will never get a proper translation.
I have the means to translate it so I can read it, so that's what I did.
Here is the fixed up translation edited to near perfection as I read through it.
The entire series should be done soon, I just need to read through it and edit the document first. That's the main limitation here. It will be released on archive.org for archival purposes.

All my translations are free to derive from. Make your own edits if you want to fix up formatting and Grammar. Use them to help your own translations, I will officiate any fixes submitted into new editions.

Shadows of the Blue Sea

I raised my voice, causing the shopkeeper’s back to jump with a violent twitch. The sorcerers sitting at the table with me also turned their eyes toward us, wondering what was happening.

"Wh... what can I do for you?" the man asked timidly.

"Judging by that attitude, you already know what I’m about to say."

As he turned around, sporting a cramped smile and breaking into a greasy sweat, I pointed at the plate of food that had just been served.

"This is Sword-Mackerel, isn't it? I ordered the specialty of the house, the Black-Fish steak."

The air around us froze at my remark.

"Listen," I said, cutting him off. "I've eaten this exact same thing before. You soak the Sword-Mackerel in oil for a while and then grill it with herbs, right?"

"Ugh...!"

Judging by the shopkeeper's groan, I was pretty much on the mark. I let out a sigh.

"If you're out of stock, just be honest and say so. Trying to cheat with a fake doesn't just hurt this shop's reputation; it taints the name of the town's specialty."

To be honest, I had hesitated for a moment when I realized it was a fake. If I pointed it out here, I would be bruising the egos of the Sorcerer's Association members who had gone through the trouble of bringing me to this shop. But if I didn't? The man would keep serving fake food, and the Association people would keep being fooled. And more importantly, I wouldn't feel right! Reading the room and quietly drawing the short straw was out of the question! I wanted to eat Black-Fish!

The shopkeeper looked troubled and, for some reason, glanced at my companions from the Association. Right then—

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sudden ringing of a bell outside was clearly an alarm signaling something unusual. Then—

"It’s him! He’s come!"

Someone shouted, and the faces of the sorcerers at my table turned pale. Without hesitation, I kicked back my chair, stood up, and dashed out of the shop!

"Li—Lina-san!"

The sorcerers scrambled to follow me. It was a port town filled with the scent of the sea breeze. The streets were overflowing with people, all of them staring in the same direction. The blue sea stretched out across the harbor. In the distance was a small island silhouette. The various ships floating in front of it were, without exception, heading toward the harbor. They were fleeing. Fleeing from something.

Then, the surface of the water shimmered. A shadow spread from the depths. Several ships were pushed aside by the waves, and—*Splash!* A single shadow kicked up the water, leaped high into the air, and let out a strange cry.

"..."

By the time I instinctively muttered something, it had submerged back into the sea. It was about the size of a small dragon. Its shape looked like someone had taken a Pacific saury, made it humongous, and sprouted long, lanky limbs from it. It looked like nothing more than a fish doodle a child had added limbs to as a joke. It jumped from the water into the sky again and again, toyed with the fleeing ships, and then finally, the sea regained its calm.

Realizing the attack was over, the people at the port began checking for damage and heading toward the ships that had been out at sea. After standing dazed for a while in the buzzing street, I turned around and asked the sorcerers.

"What was *that*??"

The three sorcerers exchanged awkward glances for a moment. Finally, the oldest one—a man around forty whose name I recalled was Quantum—opened his mouth.

"I see... There is no longer any point in hiding it. I shall tell you everything. This town of Oakman has been facing a certain problem for some time now..."

Quantum guided me to the meeting room of the Oakman Sorcerer's Association. Once everyone who had been at the eatery was seated, he began to speak in a gloomy tone.

"It started years ago, but the amount of Black-Fish we catch has been gradually decreasing. At the town's request, we in the Association launched an investigation. All we found was that the Black-Fish is a subspecies of Sword-Mackerel—a delicate fish with weak reproductive capabilities. If we catch them, it's only natural the numbers drop. If we had the budget and time, we could find a way to secure their numbers by studying their ecology, but there’s no telling how long that would take. At this rate, the numbers will only dwindle. If we stop fishing, we can't survive today; if we keep fishing, we have no future. Therefore!"

Quantum's voice jumped an octave.

"We thought! If that's the case, we should just increase the numbers ourselves, in our own way! At first, we planned to increase the Black-Fish using copy-homunculus technology. However, after making a few prototypes, we abandoned the idea due to production costs. Next, we thought of using chimera synthesis technology! The concept was to compensate for the Black-Fish's weaknesses as a species! Make it tougher! Make it bigger! Based on that concept, we synthesized Black-Fish with several types of large fish, a freshwater dragon, a Largon-type merman, and a bamboo shoot! That is what you saw—the Black-Fish: Macro-Type!"

"Wait just a minute!"

I finally cut in, shouting at Quantum as he grew more heated.

"I'll let the others slide for a second, but what was that last one? The bamboo shoot!?"

Quantum replied instantly, without a hint of doubt.

"To adjust the flavor, of course."

"I... I see..."

I gave a vague nod. I had my doubts about who on earth knew what a freshwater dragon or a Largon merman tasted like, but knowing the answer seemed scary, so I let it slide.

"But! The Macro Black-Fish we completed and released into the sea grew rapidly beyond our imagination. To make matters worse, it started interfering with the

fishing! While there haven't been any deaths, the Black-Fish harvest has been nonexistent lately... and then, a rumor reached my ears. The rumor that the traveling sorceress Lina Inverse—that is, you—was heading toward this town."

"I see."

That explained it. I had thought something was strange. Just before entering town, I had been approached by a sorcerer resting by the roadside. He seemingly knew who I was, asked to hear my travel stories, joined me, met up with two other sorcerers, and led me straight to the eatery. Rather than calling it a coincidence, it was more natural to assume they had been waiting for me from the start to ask for a favor.

"Yes—" Quantum nodded. "If the world-famous Lina Inverse, who is rumored to have only two modes—eating or rampaging—found out she couldn't eat Black-Fish, there was no doubt she would go on a rampage!"

"Hey."

"If that happened, it was clear as day that this town would suffer catastrophic damage! The scale of that destruction would likely dwarf anything the Macro Black-Fish could do! Therefore, to prevent you from noticing the town's anomaly, our only path was to deceive you with a decent fake and have you leave quietly and peacefully!"

"Wait just a damn minute!"

When I finally screamed, Quantum realized what he had just blurted out. He gave a violent shudder and, breaking into a cold sweat, stammered, "Ah. No. When I say 'deceive,' I don't mean it in a bad way, but rather in a good way!"I leaned over the table, lowering my voice slightly. "The thing is, if you just leave it alone, the damage only gets worse. So, in the end, it’s a question of how to keep the overall damage to a minimum."

At my explanation, the look in Quantum’s eyes changed. "Are you saying that if we ask you, you can... do something about the Macro Black-Fish?"

"You could interpret it that way. There seems to be a misunderstanding, but it’s not like I just blow everything up for no reason, you know?"

I calmed my nerves and let out a little chuckle. "Though, that’s assuming I get a decent reward for it," I said. Since the Macro Black-Fish created by the mages was

interfering with the fishing, the members of the Association must have been feeling quite humiliated. They likely wanted a resolution as quickly as possible.

Normally, I hate getting dragged into complicated messes, but I really wanted to try the real Black-Fish. Our mutual interests and motives were perfectly aligned. Sensing what I was trying to get at, Quantum’s gaze shifted. "And by 'decent,' specifically what kind of amount are we talking about?"

"Naturally, that changes depending on the difficulty of the job and the conditions."

And so, our eyes met as if searching for the cards in each other’s hands, and the negotiations for the reward and terms began.

The wind, carrying the scent of the tide, felt pleasant. We had left the port before dawn, but the sun was already peeking over the horizon. The sound of gulls and waves... if it weren't for the situation, I would have wanted to take a nap.

The "situation," of course, goes without saying: the subjugation of the Macro Black-Fish. Two days after accepting the request, the operation began before sunrise. Judging from what I had heard, it seemed the Macro Black-Fish attacked when a certain number of fishing boats headed out to sea. So, yesterday, we secured the cooperation of the local fishermen, and today, they all set out at once.

The plan was simple. I would board one of the boats, and if the Macro Black-Fish showed up, I’d blast it with offensive magic. If the target didn't appear, the boats could just go about their fishing as usual. The old fisherman steering my boat had already started fishing with a line. He hadn't caught a "Black-Fish" yet, but he had pulled up a few others.

"---Hm?"

Suddenly, the old man groaned quietly. While hurrying to pack up his gear, he shouted, "It’s your turn, lady mage! It’s here!"

"You can tell?" From what I could see, nothing looked particularly out of the ordinary.

"Damn right! I’ve been a fisherman my whole life! No mistake!" If he was going that far, I figured it was best to trust a fisherman's intuition.

"Okay! Then, just like we planned, get out of here!"

I began chanting the spell under my breath. Looking around, I could see the other boats floating nearby making the same tactical retreat. By this point, even I could sense the abnormality. A single, massive, shimmering shadow was in the water a short distance away!

And then, it came!

"It’s him!" someone screamed, and by then, the fleet was already rowing desperately for shore. A black shadow closed in on the group.

It was exactly the same scene as two days ago. The surface of the water shimmered and surged, and my small boat rocked violently. I grabbed the edge and braced myself so I wouldn't be tossed overboard. Then, the sea split.

Roaaaaaar!

With a roar, a massive black shape leaped from the water high into the air! It was so close it looked like nothing but a dark silhouette, but there was no way it could be anyone else! This was the exact moment I had been waiting for. I unleashed the spell I had prepared toward the giant body!

"Dragon Slave!"

An offensive spell that, as the name suggests, slaughters even dragons! A direct hit would turn it into dust!

But at that moment, something long and thin moved in my field of vision! In an instant, my eyes captured what happened. That long thing—the Macro Black-Fish's hand—moved, plucking several scales from its own body. It threw them into the air, and the red light I had fired converged on those scales instead.

BA-DOOOOM!

The shockwave from the explosion shook my entire body, at the mercy of the sea and the boat. When the impact and waves subsided, all that remained were the sea and the cluster of boats. There was no sign of the Macro Black-Fish.

"...We... we did it! That monster! It's blown to bits!"

I wanted to believe it was a fluke. Even if the Macro Black-Fish had acquired intelligence far beyond what the mages who created it expected, it would still need

knowledge to utilize it. It was simply too much of a stretch to think that a creature released into the sea for food had gained the knowledge to counter a Dragon Slave.

In reality, the Macro Black-Fish had likely sensed danger when it leaped into the air and saw my spell. It probably tried to use something as a shield, but unfortunately, there was nothing in the air. So, it instinctively ripped off its own scales and tossed them, which resulted in blocking the spell.

"---I'm sorry to say this---"

The old fisherman let out a cry of joy, but I shook my head. I didn't want to admit it, but...

"I missed—no, it was evaded. It... is probably still alive."

Through today's encounter, the Macro Black-Fish had learned how to defend against the Dragon Slave. It didn't mean it could block it every time, but since the possibility of it being blocked existed, I needed to change my approach. If it had died, there would be debris or some kind of trace. It remained submerged, but it was likely alive. If it was scared off by my attack and just left, that would be fine, too.

Problem was, if it showed up again, how would I finish it off?

Morning starts early in a fishing town, but so does the night. People who usually head out before sunrise go to bed shortly after it gets dark. Even on a day like this when they couldn't fish, that habit didn't change. Because of that, the taverns and eateries closed much earlier than in a typical tourist spot.

I was lying on my back on the bed in my room on the second floor of the inn, thinking about the day's events. To think the Dragon Slave had been parried. Even if it used something as a shield, the spell normally triggers at the point of the target. However, by using its scales—a part of itself—as a shield, the Macro Black-Fish made the spell "misunderstand" that the scales were the target.

I knew several other spells that could take it down, but I needed to blow the Macro Black-Fish into tiny pieces. Why? Because the reward I requested was the commission fee plus a full-course meal of Black-Fish.

If I defeated it by freezing it or some other method, there was a chance they'd serve me a dish made from *that* meat, claiming "the taste is the same anyway." Since I had never tasted the fresh, real thing, I might not realize it was a fake.

For those of you thinking, "If the taste is the same, what's the big deal?"—you're wrong. I wanted the real thing. It wasn't about being a gourmet. There was no guarantee that the Macro Black-Fish actually reproduced the taste and flavor of the original, and more than anything, I didn't want to eat some bizarre chimera I had personally whacked with an attack spell.

However, it's difficult to leave no trace with spells other than the Dragon Slave. I'd have to corner it with other magic and then hammer it with a Dragon Slave at the very end.

I wondered how long I had been thinking about that.

Knock, knock.

The sound of a knock interrupted my thoughts. I wouldn't call it late at night, but the town was already fast asleep. Who could it be at this hour? I sat halfway up in bed and looked toward the door—and then I realized.

The knock had come from the window with the closed shutters, on the opposite side of the door.

But this was the second floor. There was no balcony outside the window; one would have to be floating in mid-air to knock. Many mages can use Levitation, but there was no reason to visit like this. If it were an enemy targeting me for some reason, they wouldn't knock. Was it just a bug or a bird hitting the window?

Knock, knock.

Along with the distinct sound of a knock, the window shutter shook slightly. It occurred to me—I did have acquaintances who were far from "normal" and might visit a window via Levitation.

For a moment, I thought about ignoring it, but it would be a pain if the person on the other side lost patience and used force.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," I answered with a tired voice and walked to the window.

I opened the shutters, expecting someone to blurt out that they were out of money and needed a place to stay, or that they came this way to avoid the innkeeper.

There, I saw a giant fish face.

"I saw your face at this window during the day. I apologize for this rude visit; I did not wish to disturb the others."

Having said that, the Macro Black-Fish, sitting upright in mid-air in the deserted street, bowed its head.

In life, there are many times when one is at a loss for how to respond. Usually, while you're being confused, the situation just keeps moving forward. And at that moment, I realized something.

"So... uh... you can talk." That was the first thing out of my mouth after my long mental paralysis ended.

"Yes. It is a hobby of mine," the Macro Black-Fish replied.

A hobby. I see. Well, then I guess it can't be helped. I decided to give up entirely on nitpicking the details. "You probably have a reason for interfering with the fishing... so, let's hear it."

"As you wish." The Macro Black-Fish took on a distant look in its eyes. "As you may know, I was brought into this world for food by the Mages Association of this town and released into the sea. At that time, I had no knowledge or wisdom; I spent my days vaguely, harboring no particular doubt about being food. But one day, I looked up and saw the sunlight shimmering on the water, and the kelp swaying in the current..."

My encounter in such a place changed my entire life as a fish. The woman I met was a beautiful fish. It didn't take much time for us to fall in love and promise our futures to one another. However... her mother was fiercely opposed to our marriage.

"She told me, 'I won't give my precious daughter to a fish of unknown origin like you. Our family is a long line of prestigious mackerel!'"

"They're mackerel?" I couldn't help but interject.

"Yes. Mackerel," The Macro Black-Fish answered me.

The Macro Black-Fish continued his story. Based on the flow of the conversation, I had assumed the partner was a Black-Fish... or rather, I wondered if mother-in-law problems existed even among fish.

"Still, we didn’t give up. We tried to persuade her mother that we truly loved each other. Her mother then set a condition: 'Make the humans stop their fishing. If you can

do that, I might permit you to be with my daughter.' I accepted that and began interfering with the fishing. I intended to be careful not to cause any deaths."

Come to think of it, I had heard that there were indeed no fatalities.

"Even if it is for food, it was humans who created me. If I were to take human lives, hatred would only breed more hatred, and it could eventually escalate into an all-out war between humans and mackerel."

No, I really didn't think that kind of war would happen.

"Now that you have appeared, my fate is as good as sealed. But I do not want to give up! I want to carry through with my love for her! That is why, despite knowing it is unreasonable, I could only rely on your mercy! Please, have pity on this fish! Could you please stay out of this matter?"

With that, he bowed his head deeply.

Of course, I had the option of immediately chanting a spell and blowing him away right then and there, but that would certainly leave a bad taste in my mouth. On the other hand, I couldn't just overlook the interference with the fishing. I thought for a moment and spoke.

"You're lacking love."

".....Eh...?" The Macro Black-Fish looked up.

"You and that fish love each other, right?"

"Of course!"

"The mother-in-law gave you a condition that she'd give her permission if you kept interfering with the human fishing. But think about it. How long do you have to keep interfering?"

"Ah—"

"You certainly can't do it forever. Even if I listen to your wish here and leave town, eventually another skilled mage or warrior will come to exterminate you. The mother-in-law probably knows that, too. Her goal isn't to test you; it's to make you give up. You've actually realized that deep down, haven't you?"

"....."

"The most important thing is the feelings of the two fish and a happy life for both of you, right? The mother-in-law's permission is supposed to be something to make your lives happier. If you pour all your strength into that and neglect your own happiness, then you've got your priorities backward. If you lose sight of that, I can only say you're lacking love."

"T... true..." The Macro Black-Fish nodded slightly.

The moon and stars were in the night sky. In the middle of a town completely fast asleep, I was standing by a tavern window, talking about love to a giant fish. What is this situation?

"Then, what you really need to do isn't to fulfill the mother-in-law's conditions and die. It's to live and be happy with her, isn't it? Even if you don't get the mother-in-law's permission... even if you elope with her. Am I wrong?"

".....You are... absolutely right," The Macro Black-Fish murmured deeply.

Once it reached this point, there was no need to say more. My aim was to talk this guy into eloping somewhere far away. As long as the fishing could resume, it was fine by me. I could just explain to the townspeople that The Macro Black-Fish fled in fear of my attack spells. They might be stingy about paying the full commission fee, but my real goal was the Black-Fish cuisine. I felt a slight doubt about my own life choices, but I shook off that momentary hesitation and continued.

"Then! You should go talk to her as soon as possible—right after you get back to the sea—and go somewhere far away. The person you really have to cherish isn't the mother-in-law, it's her, right? The thing that would make her saddest is for you to fight humans and die."

"I understand. Thank you. I am truly glad I consulted you..."

"But if the mother-in-law is nearby, she'll definitely keep interfering, won't she?"

The Macro Black-Fish bowed deeply and returned to the night sea.

The next morning.

"Is it... is it really okay?"

As I muttered that, one of the fishermen looked out toward the open sea. I had gathered all the fishermen together with Quantum and asked them to set sail. Of course, some of the fishermen were hesitant.

"The magic I saw you use yesterday was definitely amazing, and I don't mean to doubt your skill. But if the opponent is wounded, won't it be more aggressive? If things go wrong, people might actually die this time."

To me, knowing the circumstances, the fisherman's worry was just groundless fear. Besides, they wouldn't believe the truth even if I told them. In the end, I had no choice but to get them to launch the boats so they could feel the safety for themselves.

"Even so, you can't just keep the boats in forever, right? You can't fish that way."

"That's true, but... to go out the very next day is a bit..."

Just as we were talking, *Splash!* I heard a distant sound of water. A tall spray of water rose near a small island. Reflexively looking that way, I saw a black shadow arching through the air from the far distance, heading our way. Could that be...?

The shadow crossed the blue sky, growing larger by the second, and—*K-boom!*—it fell into the sea near where we were talking!

"What?" "What happened?"

The people around me were in a panic, not knowing what had occurred. Amidst that, I alone was identifying the object that had flown in. But why—?

The surface of the sea nearby surged, and the thing that had been blown over revealed itself. Quantum and the fishermen were in a stir of confusion. Right near the pier of the harbor, the one who stood up wobbly on slender limbs was none other than The Macro Black-Fish!

"—Hey! What happened?!"

When I raised my voice, The Macro Black-Fish looked at me.

".....Ah, the person from yesterday."

"It talked!" The people around me were buzzing, but I ignored them for now.

"What on earth happened?" When I asked again, The Macro Black-Fish said in a pained voice.

"Following your advice... we decided that the two of us would go somewhere far away... but her mother noticed, and this is the result..."

"This result—"

It sounded as if he had been blown all the way here by that mother-in-law.

"Li-Li-Lina-kun!" The confused Quantum asked me in a way that was both pleading and accusing. "Are... are you an acquaintance of The Macro Black-Fish?!"

Oh, honestly! This is such a pain! I pointed a finger straight at The Macro Black-Fish.

"Last night, this guy visited me and told me that his mackerel girlfriend's mother, whom he met in the sea, had asked him to interfere with the fishing. He asked me what he should do, so I advised him to elope!"

".....What a ridiculous story..."

"I kept quiet because I knew you'd say that! But looking at this situation, you have no choice but to accept it, right?"

Quantum said with a bewildered face, "H-however, that would mean... The Macro Black-Fish was just blown away by a mackerel mother-in-law? Surely that's—"

I thought so too, of course.

"Hey, what kind of fish is that mother-in-law?"

When I asked, The Macro Black-Fish looked out to sea.

"She's a mackerel. Of course. Look—" he pointed to the sea. "She's a bit larger than usual, but you can see her, right?"

Everyone looked where he pointed. But there was only the same blue sea as always. There was no sign of a giant fish shadow in the water at all—

"Come to think of it—" one fisherman muttered while looking around the offshore area. "I remember hearing a story from my grandpa when I was a kid about a

incredibly huge master of the sea living out there... but I don't see any fish... wait... what?"

His voice froze mid-sentence.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

The fisherman said hesitantly, "Isn't the position of that small island... weird?"

Eh...? I looked out to sea again. The blue sea. A small island visible in the distance. Waves shimmering around it. Or rather—

"......Hey, isn't that moving?" another fisherman muttered.

"Yes. That is her," The Macro Black-Fish said. "That is the mother-in-law. What you see is only the tip of her dorsal fin."

After a silence that felt like both an instant and an eternity, everyone shouted in unison with miraculous harmony.

"Wait just a minute!"

"She's a mackerel, right? A mackerel! Not some mysterious monster!"

"I heard she's been large since long ago and was often teased as a child."

"That's not the level of the problem here!"

"No, wait, Lina-san!" It was Quantum who spoke to me as I was shouting. "They say that fish living in the water grow larger the longer they live. Besides, the sea beyond this point is said to be the Demon Sea, the territory of the Mazoku. It wouldn't be strange for anything to happen there."

No. It's definitely strange for a mackerel to become that gigantic. Using the Demon Sea as an excuse to explain away common-sense-defying events... well, it’s a bit much. However, it's the tragedy of human nature that when told such a thing, one almost finds oneself convinced.

"—The Demon Sea, huh."

"I see, if it's the work of the Demon Sea..." The fishermen around nodded.

Well, conversely, there was no evidence to claim it *wasn't* the influence of the Demon Sea. Regardless of the cause, as a practical matter for the moment, if there was a giant mackerel...

"Setting aside both the small details and the big ones!" I pointed at the small island—no, the mackerel's back. "To put it simply, everything will be settled if I just take that thing down, right?!"

"W-wait a moment, please!" But it was The Macro Black-Fish who hurriedly called for a stop. "It's true that the mother-in-law is against the marriage, but even so, I have no intention of doing something so 'un-fish-like' as harming her! Please stop!"

"Then what are you going to do?!"

"Well, that is true, but—"

"You can't win against that fish, can you?!"

"It's okay! I'll just scare her a little!"

"Your spells are not at the level of 'just scaring'! Please stop! If you intend to hurt the mother-in-law, I cannot just stand by and watch!"

Fine.

"Oh? You can't just stand by? So, what do you plan to do?"

Our gazes—mine from the land and The Macro Black-Fish's from the sea—clashed like sparks.

".....I just thought of something while listening to this." A fisherman's timid voice slid in between the two of us and our tense atmosphere. "Wouldn't this whole thing be settled if we just stopped catching mackerel?"

"That's it!"

The voices raised by me and The Macro Black-Fish harmonized in the sea breeze.

Thus, in this year, a peace treaty was concluded between humanity and the mackerel. Henceforth, the fishermen would release any mackerel caught in their lines or nets back into the sea. In exchange, The Macro Black-Fish and the mackerel clan would focus their efforts on protecting and breeding the famous Black-Fish. For the

achievement of brokering this treaty, The Macro Black-Fish was apparently accepted by the mother-in-law as well.

Since the idea for the peace conditions came from the fishermen, my commission fee was a bit reduced as expected, but I was able to eat plenty of Black-Fish dishes, so I was generally satisfied. For the Black-Fish themselves, I felt like this was nothing but a nuisance, but at the very least, as long as that "small island" remained offshore, this town would continue to prosper through fishing.

For now, they all lived happily ever after.

(Shadows of the Blue Sea: Finished)

The Girl Falls in Love

"Love me, Maiden!" A flash of hostility—no, it was a premonition. And it was heading right for me! This was bad. If things kept going like this, I was going to get dragged into something. I killed my footsteps and changed my course yet again.

But still! The presence kept drawing closer! I became certain of it: the other party had noticed me and was trying to involve me. “You little...!”

Hostility flashed in the darkness, but it wasn't aimed at me. Sensing the atmosphere of a battle, I stopped in my tracks. A town at night under the pouring moonlight. Someone was fighting someone else. Obviously.

I had absolutely no desire to get caught up in something like that. I avoided the location of the presence and took a detour toward my inn. I don’t know why I’m so often misunderstood, but I, Lina Inverse, don't exactly *like* fighting. I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a pacifist, but I prefer to avoid useless conflict if possible...

Of course, if I said that right after blowing away a bandit gang that had set up camp near town and swiping their treasure, some people might think I lacked credibility. But! Defeating bandits to maintain public order—and getting treasure as a little bonus—is by no means "useless"!

And so, I circled around by one street. But just as I thought I was clear, the presence felt close. But from where—?

"Hey, you over there!"

The voice fell from above. A shadow plummeted down, passing right through the spot where I had instinctively jumped back half a pace. Then, with a frantic clatter of footsteps, she circled behind me! She was totally planning to use me as a shield!

But before I could even retort, the woman who had jumped down from the roof shouted, "It's dangerous! Run!"

"If you interfere, you'll regret it! You'll step aside for me, won't you?"

Another woman's voice came from above. The presence shifted.

I looked up. There, atop a roof against the backdrop of the starry sky, stood the silhouette of a woman. She moved her fingertips while staring down at me, and with a series of small *beep-beep-beeps*, a monocle she was wearing began to glow faintly. Was it some kind of magical artifact?

"To think you'd try to help a complete stranger... how reckless! Let's see… Her Romance Power'? It's only 5!"[1]

"...What? What is this 'Romance Power'?"

The woman on the roof took my question seriously. "I see," she muttered to herself before floating down from the roof and landing a short distance away. She moved with a lithe, cat-like grace. As she landed, her ample chest—clearly visible even at night—heaved ostentatiously.

"In this harsh world, to think there are still eccentric people who would help a stranger."

The second woman looked at me as if I were a rare specimen. It was too dark to see clearly, but I could tell she was a beauty. It wasn't just her features; her every gesture and movement exuded the air of a mature woman. The phrase "sexy older woman" was probably invented for someone like her.

"But you know? If you stick your nose in where it doesn't belong without knowing your place, you'll get hurt."

She took something small from her pocket and placed it over her left eye. A monocle.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I can tell you're one of the 'bad guys,'" I said, a slight, bitter smile on my face while my temple throbbed.

[1] I'm choosing to translate this to more resemble the over 9000 scene, as it's very likely a reference and if it isn't then it should be.

The woman replied with a smug look. "Just as the name implies, it's the power to attract the opposite sex. If you use this scouting magitech device, you can measure the numerical value."

"...Heh... You can tell just by looking?"

"Of course. By analyzing gestures and appearance. In a woman's case, things like the difference between the top and under-bust measurements—"

Snap.

"Shut up! **Mega Brand!**"

Boom!

With a single, brilliant blow of my anger, the woman had been sent flying and promptly knocked unconscious. I could not forgive anyone who judged everything based on outward appearances!

As I caught my breath, I finally remembered the first woman. While suppressing my lingering rage, I heard a voice from behind me.

"...You're quite strong."

"Hey, you! You dragged me into that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Never mind that, listen! I'm being targeted!"

She brushed off my complaint and began pleading her own desperate situation. Of course, I had no obligation to listen to someone who ignored what I had to say.

"Like I care!" I snapped, turning on my heel to walk toward the inn. To my back, she called out:

"Is that okay? Letting the world become a place where people like them—who judge a woman's value by her bust size—run rampant?"

Regrettably, those words were more than enough to make me stop in my tracks.

After waiting for her ordered drink to be served, she opened her mouth.

"I'm Carrot Rochefort. I used to live in Lalleck Village, a little ways from here."

Viewed again under the lamplight of the inn's first-floor dining hall, she was a striking beauty with short red hair. She wore rough, easy-to-move-in clothes, but they suited her perfectly. She looked to be in her early twenties, a bit older than me.

"Used to live," she—Carrot—said in the past tense. When she stared straight at me with that serious face, I felt like I was being glared at, perhaps because of her sharp, strong-willed eyes.

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse. As you can see, a traveling sorceress."

When I introduced myself, she frowned slightly. "Lina Inverse...? I feel like I've heard that somewhere... Are you famous, maybe?"

"Rather than me, let's talk about you and those people." I took a sip of my orange juice.

"Right... Well, I had someone I liked. But it was a one-sided love. It wasn't that we were of different social standings or that he had a girlfriend; I just didn't have the courage to confess my feelings. That's when they appeared before me. The messengers of 'Romance Hive: The Love Nest'."

"Romance Hive?"

I instinctively parroted her, and she gave a small nod.

"Romance Hive: The Love Nest. That's the name of their organization. 'Say goodbye to the cowardly you of yesterday. Secure a more radiant tomorrow for yourself.' I was lured in by those words and decided to join. But..."

She toyed with the rim of her cup—hot fruit wine—with her fingertips, letting her gaze wander for a moment before dropping her eyes back to the cup and speaking.

"It was a different place than I expected."

"Different how? If you want me on your side, you'll have to explain that properly."

"Right... I don't really understand what a 'marriage consultation office' is supposed to be, but..." Carrot nodded. "It was a den of romantic supremacists!"

"A den?"

"They strip away the hearts of those who enter and turn them into 'Romance Puppets' who exist only to fall in love!"

"What kind of organization is that?!" Even I, who didn't quite get it, could tell that it definitely wasn't a marriage consultation office.

"I don't know their final goal. But I can say for sure that they're the kind of people who stop at nothing for the sake of romance! They probably use the 'Suspension Bridge Effect' and 'fated encounters' to pull people into the organization."

"Suspension Bridge Effect?"

When I asked about the unfamiliar term, she nodded. "It's an effect where, if a man and a woman experience a heart-pounding sensation together in a scary place—like a suspension bridge—they might mistake that excitement for love. That woman assassin from earlier was probably cornering me so that a male assassin lying in wait could jump out and rescue me. I think they were planning to use a combo of the Suspension Bridge Effect and a fated encounter to force me into a state of 'love' and take me back to the organization."

"I see..."

"To create a scene where they can whisper their feelings in the shade of a tree on a small hill, they wouldn't hesitate to burn down an entire village or town."

I imagined it. A man and a woman acting shy in the shade of a tree on a hill while a burning town blazed in the background.

"...Wait, that's not romance anymore! That's more like some kind of mental illness!"

"That's just how the organization thinks. Fortunately, I escaped before I could undergo their 'personality correction'... but the Romance Hive doesn't forgive traitors."

"So it's not like they're trying to 'dispose' of you?"

"Well, they're a romance office, not an assassin's guild."

"Hmm..." I groaned and took another sip of juice. If what she said was true, they certainly were an organization that didn't care about the means to justify the end.

However, Carrot had forced me into the mess, tried to use me as a shield, and then tried to recruit me once she realized I was strong. It would be nonsense to take her words at face value. If that organization really did burn down towns for the sake of love, the army wouldn't stay quiet, and there would be rumors. But I had never heard such a rumor.

When I thought about it that way, I figured it was best to take her story with a grain of salt—or at worst, assume it was a total lie. If that were the case, there was no reason for me to help her, even if she offered a bit of a reward.

"Of course—" Carrot continued, unaware that I had already made up my mind. "They believe appearance is crucial for romance, so they tend to look down on short people or women with small chests."

"...Huh?" My eyebrow twitched.

"That said—" Carrot leaned across the table, lowering her voice meaningfully. "Since they are a romance office, they naturally have ways to follow up on that. If you get your hands on their know-how, it's possible to increase your bust size or even your height."

"You can do that?! Such a thing exists?!" I leaned in, practically shouting.

"Yes. That woman assassin you blew away—if you had left her alone, she would have listed all your flaws and then tried to recruit you, saying something like, 'Even someone like you can see your height and bust size increase in the blink of an eye at the Love Nest! If you want to polish your rank as a woman, join the Romance Hive now!'"

"...That..." A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. If I had been scouted like that, would I have been able to refuse?

"Of course, if you joined, you'd have your personality corrected and you wouldn't be 'you' anymore. But... if you protect me and take care of those guys, we might be able to get our hands on their 'Womanhood Up' techniques for increasing height and bust size. How about it? I don't think it's a bad deal."I knew the location of the headquarters. Carrot had escaped from the Romance Hive—the "Love Beehive"—and she knew exactly where it was.

If that was the case, then going there ourselves was the obvious move. Of course, my explanation didn't mean I suddenly found Carrot’s words completely credible. I didn't, but...

"If this is a secondary escort request, let's start by talking about the fee," I replied, clinging to that single thread of hope.

The next morning, Carrot and I were heading east along the highway. We weren't running away. We were going to them. If we just waited, we’d be stuck on the defensive, and the enemy would always get the first move. We would break in and settle things.

Last night, I had considered another factor. I wanted to see if Carrot was lying. If she were, she would have avoided getting actively involved with the enemy, since that would increase the chances of her lie being exposed. However, she accepted the plan without hesitation. For now, I ruled out the possibility that she was lying.

"But be careful, Lina," Carrot said with a serious look as we walked down the highway, bathed in the soft morning sun. "Since you defeated that assassin last night, they know about you. They’ll surely take appropriate measures. You can use attack magic and you seem used to combat, but..."

She frowned and groaned. "The Romance Hive's attack patterns will likely be unlike anything you've seen before. They'll use any means necessary."

I groaned back at her. "Falling in love... what kind of attack is even—"

As I spoke, I realized my voice was getting smaller. Noticing this, Carrot looked down the road ahead—and the sound of her gasping reached my ears clearly.

The highway continued in a gentle arc. To the left was a grove of trees, and as we advanced, more of it came into view. There, in the shade of the trees along the road, it stood.

A massive man with a bright red mohawk, wearing a spiked leather jacket over his bare skin. A man like that was crouching by the roadside, playing with a puppy in a wooden box. On his left cheek, visible from where we stood, was a skull tattoo.

"So high! His Romance Power is so high!"

"Wait a minute! That guy has a Romance Power over 2,000, and mine is five?! What does that even mean?!" I shouted, snapping at the ridiculous logic.

But I had my own ulterior motives for this plan. First, I had no intention of doing something as tedious as "escorting" for very long. Second, I figured if we went to the enemy's headquarters, there'd be a better chance of getting my hands on that "Lady-Level Up" technique. Third, this would lead to a quick decisive battle, meaning the escort fee Carrot had to pay would be smaller.

"Don't look!" Carrot let out a warning cry that sounded like a scream and turned her face away. "If you look, you'll fall in love!"

"I will not!"

The man stood up, turned his back to us, and cast a shy smile over his shoulder. "Heh, you saw a side of me I didn't want shown."

"Shut up! *Freeze Brid!*"

My icy strike instantly froze the man solid. I made sure to miss the puppy, of course. Carrot let out a cry of admiration.

"Amazing! You repelled that attack!"

"You're damn right."

As if responding to Carrot's voice, the bushes behind the frozen mohawk man rustled, and another man appeared. He held a cane in one hand and wore a monocle—no, a scouting magitech device—along with a mustache, a pale complexion, a cape, and a silk hat. He was a middle-aged man who looked like the textbook definition of "insufferably polite."

"I am the messenger of the Romance Hive, Master Rex. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

For a moment, I thought about blasting him with an attack spell while he was mid-sentence, but there were things I wanted to ask. I didn't sense anyone else hiding nearby, so I figured listening to him might be interesting.

Whether he knew what I was thinking or not, Master Rex continued. "To tell the truth, I have come to retrieve Miss Rockfall, who left in the middle of our curriculum. But if I may ask, who are you to her?"

"I'm just a traveling sorceress passing through. Name's Lina Inverse."

I immediately cut off Master Rex's words. "It sounds like Carrot wants to quit your 'curriculum' or whatever. You won't let her stop, so she came to me for advice. I heard something about her almost being brainwashed?"

I tried to sound provocative, but he just gave a relaxed smile. "Brainwashed? My, what a way to put it. It is merely a reform of consciousness. Love requires an outward appearance, but it's meaningless unless the person has a strong desire to maintain a certain level of quality in that appearance. It would be pointless if they gained a beautiful form with us, only to revert the moment they left."

"Even if the person says they don't want it?"

"But they *do* want it," Master Rex asserted. "If they didn't want to change, they wouldn't have come to us in the first place. They sought our help because they wanted to change themselves. Am I wrong, Miss Carrot?"

I laughed in his face. "Maybe it's true she wanted to change. But that doesn't mean anything goes. The direction she wanted to go and the direction you were forcing her in were completely different. She left because she hated it. Simple as that."

"Hmm. That is troublesome." Master Rex toyed with the brim of his silk hat. "Our curriculum can have negative effects if interrupted halfway. I would prefer that she return of her own accord..."

Carrot glared straight at Master Rex and answered firmly. "Lina’s words made it clear to me. I did want to change my cowardly self. But you force people to act like they love someone they don't, calling it 'practice.' That’s not being true to your heart! It's the opposite. It’s just practice in lying to yourself! I’m done with that! I’m leaving the Romance Hive!"

"I'm afraid I cannot allow that. I believe it was explained upon enrollment that withdrawals mid-curriculum are discouraged. Taking only the convenient parts of the know-how we provided and then saying goodbye is far too selfish. If you insist, then unfortunately, I shall have to stop you—with the power of romance."

Not "by force," apparently. He looked back and forth between Carrot and me. "I look forward to seeing if you can resist falling in love when faced with the Romance Masters who will appear before you."

With that, Master Rex sank into the bushes and his presence vanished instantly.

I sighed. I had wanted to push the conversation toward things like bust-enhancement or height-increasing techniques, but since he withdrew so easily, there was nothing I could do. The mohawk man was still there, but since they abandoned him, he probably didn't know anything important.

"Thank you, Lina. You saved me." Convinced that the threat was gone, Carrot let out a sigh of gratitude. "If it weren't for you, I... I definitely would have fallen in love."

"Don't fall for something like that!" I pointed at the mohawk while still looking away, but she still kept her eyes averted.

"Something like that... You're really strong, Lina. To think your maiden heart doesn't waver even after seeing that... but that's why I'm counting on you."

I couldn't accept that a maiden's heart would waver over *that*, but arguing seemed like a lost cause. "Yeah, yeah. Anyway, let's hurry."

Over the next few days, the Romance Hive's attacks were relentless. At every turn, a golden-haired man on a white horse appeared, or a broodingly handsome swordsman coughed from a chest illness, or a silver-haired boy with a sister complex read a book by an inn window, or a slightly boisterous black-haired girl hugged the shoulder of a cool upperclassman with glasses.

Each time, Carrot almost fell in love, and each time, I blew the men away with attack spells.

After repeating this several times, we finally arrived at the outskirts of a town called Lake-Inn.

"Is this it?"

Spread out before me was a wide, well-manicured garden, and beyond it stood a building painted in red and white that looked somewhat celebratory. It didn't look like a private residence, but there were no signs at all. If Carrot had led me here, then...

"Yes." Her voice was slightly hoarse as she nodded. "This is their headquarters. The Romance Hive."

"Don't be fooled by appearances. It's a cruel romance training facility. There's a basement that goes on forever, where hundreds of men and women troubled by love undergo bloody romance training."

What kind of training *was* that?

"They must know we're here. There's definitely a trap," Carrot said with a tense expression.

I scratched the back of my head. "It's not so much a trap as they're already prepared to welcome us. Come out! Behind that garden tree! I know you're hiding there!"

I had been sensing a presence that wasn't even trying to hide for a while now.

"My, my." The silence following my call lasted only a moment. Then the leaves rustled, and a man stepped out from the shadows. Golden hair and pure white clothes. In his hand, he held a single red rose. "You finally made it here, didn't you, little kitten?"

The moment the man appeared!

"Guh-ack?!"

Carrot let out a groan and doubled over, blood spraying from her nose.

"Carrot!"

My voice reached her, and she barely managed to stay on her feet. Wiping the nosebleed with a handkerchief, she struggled to straighten up, but her gaze was wavering wildly and she refused to look at the man. I was half-exasperated and half-resigned.

"Are you... Carrot, were you about to fall in love again? Fine, I'll just blast that guy with an attack spell—"

"Wait! No!" she cried out in a piteous voice. "That's Joseph! He's... he's the one I had a crush on back in our village, the one I couldn't gather the courage to confess to!"

"What?!" I looked at the man again.

The reason Carrot joined the Romance Hive in the first place was because she lacked the courage to confess to her crush.

"If that guy is in a place like this..." I glared at the man—Joseph. "Don't tell me you're an agent for the Romance Hive who was sent to lure Carrot in?!"

"You're wrong, little tomboy puppy," Joseph said, giving me a sidelong glance at a forty-five-degree angle. "I was born and raised in Larek Village, just like the little kitten Carrot. If you don't believe me, why don't you ask her?"

"That's... true..." Carrot muttered in a muffled voice before I could even ask. Looking at her out of the corner of my eye, I saw blood still dripping through the gaps in her fingers as she covered the lower half of her face.

"To tell the truth," Joseph said. "I liked you too, Carrot."

Pshaaaa! Finally unable to withstand the pressure of the erupting nosebleed, Carrot's body flipped backward! And Joseph pressed the attack!

"After you vanished from the village, I wandered the world, searching for a trace of you. It was then that Master Lex of the Romance Hive appeared before me. He told me that you had entered the Hive. He told me that if I joined as well, I would surely be able to be with you, Carrot."

Blood sprayed violently from Carrot's nose.

"Look at what he's become! Joseph, the person you actually liked—was he really this kind of person? You didn't fall for some weirdo playing the suave leading man, manipulated and dressed up by the Romance Hive, did you?"

"The real Joseph..." she murmured like she was in a trance.

"Yes! The real him!"

"Joseph... well, he was always like this, even back in the village..."

"He was like this from the start?!"

Carrot's nosebleed intensified. This was bad. Carrot was the type who could fall in love with a random mohawked guy playing with a dog on the street; there was no way she could withstand a direct attack like "reunion with a long-time crush" combined with a "declaration of mutual love."

Whether she drowned in her own nosebleed or not was none of my business, but if she got swept away and returned to the organization, she'd cancel her request to me. That meant I'd lose my chance to learn how to increase my height and bust size. I had to prevent that at all costs!

"Carrot! Pull yourself together! Don't lose yourself!" I scolded her as she staggered. "Remember! Don't fall for an object like that! However, if that's how it is, I only have one move to make! Setting that aside—Fireball!"

"Gwa-hoh?!"

"Ah! Joseph!"

With the single shot I fired, Joseph was unceremoniously blown away, and Carrot let out a grief-stricken scream.

"Lina, how could you?!"

She snapped at me, but of course, I couldn't tell her I did it for the sake of my height and bust size. I met her gaze head-on and tried to push my point.

"Don't be fooled. If you go back to the Romance Hive, it really is the end for you."

"What do you mean, the end?"

I didn't actually mean anything specific—it was just something I pulled out of thin air—but I kept going with whatever popped into my head.

"I mean you won't be with him. Think back to what you told me. They change people's hearts. Under the guise of 'training,' they make people act like they love someone they don't. If you go back to the organization, your own heart will be erased. You'll undergo that training again, and one day you'll be made to 'love' Joseph. Naturally, by then, Joseph's heart—the one that supposedly loved you—will be completely erased too. When that happens, do you think the Romance Hive will actually let you be together? They won't. Definitely not. In the worst-case scenario, I bet they'd ship you off to some red-light district under the guise of 'practice.'"

"I certainly cannot let those insults slide."

Along with a familiar voice, Master Lex stepped out from the shadow of a nearby thicket. So he was here too!

"We at the Romance Hive operate with a firm philosophy. To hurl such judgmental insults just because you cannot comprehend it... well, it certainly shows your upbringing."

"A firm philosophy, huh?" I stepped forward. "If such a thing exists, I'd certainly love to hear it."

"In this world, loving only one person with total devotion is considered sincere and noble. But is that truly the case? Humans are beings who should live with a constant desire for self-improvement. Better food, a better life. Wishing for more income to achieve that. Some people look down on that and call it greed, but if one is satisfied with the status quo and simply lives aimlessly without a desire to improve, one cannot truly be said to be living. The same applies to romance. I believe it is the mission of those with more mature concepts to guide those who possess only immature ones."

"And I suppose you consider yourselves the ones with the 'mature' concepts?"

"We believe that by polishing and improving oneself, one becomes worthy of a better partner. Don't you think that’s wonderful? In fact, there are many men and women attracted to the idea of 'marrying into wealth' that we provide, aren't there?"

"Of course. Improving one's charm as a woman or a man—Romance Power—and reforming one's consciousness are simply the means to realize that. Members can encounter better matches, and those partners are happy to have been introduced to a good person. Rather, I would like to ask where exactly the problem lies."

"I see. If we ignore the part about disregarding a person's free will, or the whole sincerity versus insincerity thing, your sales pitch doesn't sound too bad. It's your business what kind of romance you find valuable. But erasing someone's feelings for a specific person just to brainwash them into thinking 'marrying for money is wonderful' is what I'd call meddling where you aren't wanted."

"If you value individual will so much, Lina, then this shouldn't even be an issue you're interfering with, should it?"

"Carrot herself asked me to be her guard. It’s not like I don't have a reason to step in. From what I heard from Carrot, you lure people in with promises of increasing their height or chest size. You're just taking advantage of people's complexes. There's no way people doing that have 'mature' ideas. If you claim otherwise, then prove it by telling me the method for increasing height and bust size! For free! Right now!"

I managed to slip the demand in quite naturally during the flow of conversation!

"Wait—what?! Lina?!" Carrot blurted out something behind me, but I didn't have time to deal with her. I focused all my senses on Master Lex, waiting for his next words.

"Ho-ho..." He toyed with the brim of his silk hat and let a small smile creep onto his face. "So that is your goal? However! Unfortunately, we cannot leak the secrets of our free-size pads and thick-soled elevator boots to non-members!"

"It leaked! It leaked big time! Your secret just hit rock bottom!"

So it was just padding and lifts after all? Of course, that wasn't what I was hoping for. Maybe it was fine if you just cared about fashion or appearances, but... While I had halfway expected this outcome, it still made me feel pathetic. I let out a sigh of exhaustion, waving one hand dismissively.

"Forget it. If that's the 'secret,' I don't need to know."

"You're good at acting tough. But in that case, further discussion is a waste of time for both of us."

Crap! I thought Joseph wasn't hiding his presence just to intimidate us—but it was actually to hide this man's presence! Realizing it now was too late.

"Now then." Master Lex's voice held me in place. "Though it's boorish, let's call this a hostage situation. This is the end. I shall have you fall in love with me."

"Like hell you will! Fireball!"

Kaboom!

"If you want to guarantee her safety, then—"

Master Lex tapped the ground with the tip of his cane. Suddenly, Carrot screamed from behind me. I spun around to see a man holding her in a full nelson!

"Carrot?!"

I dashed toward the man holding her. I didn't even need to say the cliché lines; the situation was clear.

"The skill you showed in repelling the temptations of the Romance Masters we sent is worthy of admiration, but this is the end. Our request is not a large one."

Master Lex flicked his cloak, his monocle glinting. The man holding Carrot looked like he hadn't been told how to handle a situation like this, his face twitching in fear. My right fist buried itself deep into his face.

Staggering, the now freed Carrot leaned against my shoulder.

"Are you okay, Carrot?"

"Yeah... somehow... more importantly... are you okay, Lina? It looked like you took Master Lex's 'Cool Middle-Aged Gentleman Monocle Glimmer' attack head-on..."

"Wait, that thing just now... was it some kind of technique?"

The one who groaned at my words was the charred, fallen Master Lex. He looked at me, his face twisting in shock.

"It can't be... You mean to say it had no effect at all? Could it be... that it actually exists? The legendary Super… uhm"

"Nu-gwoooh?!"

Master Lex ignored my protest, a strangely enlightened smile appearing on his face.

"Heh... No wonder all the Romance Masters were defeated... To think we were up against such a being... Our research was completely insufficient... Very well... It is our total defeat. I'll acknowledge Carrot's withdrawal... Feel free to take Joseph with you as well..."

"Yay! Lina, thank you! It's all thanks to you having zero romantic elements! I'll go make dinner right away!"

Carrot hugged me, overwhelmed with emotion, but I definitely wasn't satisfied with how this sounded.

"Hey! Wait! Don't talk about me like I'm some ultimate rare species of dense human! People don't normally just fall in love from something like that, do they?!"

Still on the ground, Lex feebly moved his trembling right hand to touch his monocle. A small *beep-beep-beep* sounded, and light raced across its surface. So that thing was a magical scouting device too.

"Her Romance Resistance… it’s level 9999… She’s an insensitive blockhead!"

"Wait a minute! Who are you talking about?!"

Nobody present paid any attention to my protests. Thus, the incident came to an end. However, a murky feeling of dissatisfaction lingered in my heart.

I swear, I'm going to find a boyfriend someday!

(The Girl Falls in Love: Finished)

The House Where Spirits Dwell

"They appear."

Those were the first words Mr. Lutz said, his voice gloomy. The wick of the lamp crackled as it burned, and the flickering light cast deep shadows that made his expression look even more haggard.

"What exactly... appears?"

When I asked, he hesitated for a moment before answering.

"I believe... they are ghosts."

"Ghosts..." I murmured vaguely.

Everyone has heard the word "ghost" before. They're said to be the souls of the dead or fragments of emotion; some don't do anything at all, while others cause harm to people. Even the "do-nothing" types aren't necessarily harmless. Just appearing suddenly is enough to give people a heart attack, which is a lot of stress for the living. For example, if an old man's ghost appeared in the bathroom—even if he didn't do anything bad, it would be impossible to have a relaxing bath.

But still... I never expected a sorcerer to come to me for advice about ghosts.

I felt like this house was haunted by spirits.

I had dropped by the town of Sanity Bell while wandering on a journey and decided to poke my head into the Sorcerers' Guild to offer a greeting. When I introduced myself as Lina Inverse, the conversation turned into an offer to hold a welcoming banquet so they could hear my travel stories. Just before that banquet ended, a black-haired man in his thirties named Mr. Marcel Lutz came to me, saying he had something to discuss. There were dark circles under his eyes that made him look blatantly unhealthy, and although he should have been of medium build, he gave off a

somewhat haggard impression. Sensing something unusual in his cornered expression and his insistence on talking as soon as possible, I moved the conversation to a different tavern-and-eatery.

He continued. "Actually... the other day, I found a house at a bargain price and bought it... but it turned out to be a haunted house. It started happening before the move was even properly finished. Doors and windows would open and close on their own even though no one was there... I have a wife and a child, and they were so scared that they went back to her parents' home. I'm a bit of a sorcerer myself, so I thought I could handle something like a ghost, but..."

It was a ghost… At first. "I have an acquaintance who can use spells that work on ghosts... I thought I'd just ask him to take care of it... but..."

The result, of course, went without saying. If it had gone well, he wouldn't be consulting me. But why?

"We can't find it. The ghost, I mean." He spoke before I could voice my doubt. "Apparently, to defeat it with his spells, he has to actually hit the ghost—but we can't find its form."

"No form, but there are phenomena... a poltergeist." As I muttered this, Mr. Lutz nodded.

"Yes. But even in that case, there's supposed to be a main body or a core somewhere. So, thinking I should hire a specialist in that field to find it, I asked an acquaintance who is a necromancer to investigate—but the result was that I was told there was no such thing here."

"Not there?" As I knit my brows, he scratched his head roughly with one hand and let out his words along with a sigh.

"The necromancer said he even investigated from the astral side, so there's no mistake. But strange things are definitely happening. According to him, the ghost isn't in this house all the time, but is constantly wandering around, and it just happens to cause strange things only in this house... If so, what should I do? Even though there's no set time for it to appear... I didn't know what to do... when I asked, he said I just had to aim for the moment it appears... It was then, Miss Lina, that you came to this town. I've heard the rumors about you for a long time, and from the stories I heard at the banquet, it seems you've been involved in various incidents. Then...!"

"I thought if I borrowed your wisdom, maybe something could be done...! Please, could you lend me your strength!" Mr. Lutz bowed his head as if collapsing onto the table. I didn't expect much in the way of a reward, but my curiosity was piqued. A ghost of unknown whereabouts, huh?

"Of course I will show my gratitude!"

"I can't guarantee a resolution—but if that's fine with you, I'll help out."

And so, I set out to investigate Mr. Lutz' house.

The next morning. "Well... how should I put it... it certainly has an 'atmosphere' now..." I said as I looked at the house. It wasn't exactly a mansion, but it was a solid three-story stone building. The overall color was a sunken gray. Perhaps it was the tarnish of years, or perhaps it was that way from the start, but it wore an air of gloom. The garden was overgrown with weeds and featured a collapsed gazebo. The garden trees had branches and leaves growing out of control, creating shadows all around. The weeds had been barely cleared away from the gate to the entrance.

(I think the impression would change quite a bit if I tended the garden and repainted the walls…) but before I could get to that, the strange things started happening...

Even though the sun had risen and the town was full of morning energy, I felt as if the air was stagnant in this one corner. Was it because of the atmosphere the house gave off?

"It's here."

"I see." I spoke after the two of us stopped in front of the house. "Well, it's a pretty big house; this would be enough for a family to live in, and you could even have a library or a room for research."

The previous night, Mr. Lutz had wanted to start the investigation immediately, but frankly, I was tired. We decided to get into top condition and start the next day. Perhaps he hated the idea of returning to a haunted house alone, as he took a room at the same inn as me. Setting aside the appearance, as a house for a researcher-type sorcerer whose things tend to accumulate, it wasn't bad.

"Yes. One day, a rumor started that there was something about this house, and buyers disappeared. That's why I bought it." His hand holding the key taken from his pocket was trembling. Don't call him a coward.

"Apparently, the original owner who built this house was also a sorcerer. He died a very long time ago. I heard he was quite elderly and passed away after losing consciousness at a tavern he dropped into. It wasn't a criminal incident; it seems the cause was simply too much alcohol for his age."

"A sorcerer?" I knit my brows at the word I couldn't ignore.

"Yes. So, of course, I considered it too. Whether there was some connection between that sorcerer and the abnormalities currently occurring in this house. I looked into various things, and the sorcerer's name was Leonard Dufour. He belonged to our Sorcerers' Guild and died about thirty years ago."

As he spoke, Mr. Lutz walked between the gateposts, which had no gate, and headed toward the house. I kept pace with him. Was it just my imagination that I felt a sense of unease through the soles of my shoes as I stepped on the weeds?

"He was an old-timer at our guild, and there were several people who knew him directly. But he was extremely cautious about other sorcerers stealing his research; he only did his research at home, and he even kept it a secret what he was researching. He had no family, and he only showed up at the guild to do a little looking up in the library. After he died, the town took over management of the house since there were no relatives to inherit the estate. They disposed of the household goods with the Sorcerers' Guild present... but apparently, they couldn't find a single book on sorcery, let alone any traces that he had been researching something."

I was feeling a strange sensation while listening to this story. My instincts were screaming, as if rejecting approaching this house.

"A few years later, a couple who moved to town started living in the house, but they left within a few months. After that, similar things happened several times, and eventually..."

Mr. Lutz stopped. The smell of damp earth was growing stronger. "I was naive. I thought there must be a reason for it being cheap. Even if it was a ghost, honestly, I did consider the possibility a little. But—I thought if anything happened, I could just ask my fellow sorcerers and it would work out. Thinking that, I felt it was a bargain..."

He continued as he walked toward the entrance. "Even for a sorcerer, if you can use spells to blow a ghost away, that's one thing, but if not, a house with a ghost of unknown purpose and identity is bound to be creepy."

With a heavy *clack*, the lock opened. The gap of the door as it creaked open revealed a dim darkness within. A straight hallway. There were two doors on the left and right. In the middle, there was a staircase going up, and at the end, there was no door, leading into the living room. The shutters were closed on the living room windows, and the only light was what leaked in from the door we had opened.

Stepping into the house with the entrance door still open, the chilly air clung to my skin.

"But—that was a mistake. I was wrong..." Mr. Lutz whispered in a small voice, as if afraid of being heard by something in the house, as he headed toward the living room in the back. The dimness was probably what was creepy, but it would be a problem if he got too scared. So—

"For now, I'll brighten things up a bit."

I muttered a spell and launched a magical light toward the hallway ceiling. Illuminated by the brilliant light, it was nothing special—just an old, but normal, stone hallway. "Light."

But at that moment. *Bam! Click!*

The sound of the entrance door closing and the lock turning echoed from far behind us. It was a bolt-style lock, very thorough. When I turned around, the door that should have been left wide open was closed and firmly locked.

"...Hee... hee... this is terrible, Miss Lina..." Without turning around, Mr. Lutz spoke in a raspy voice. "Please don't close the door so suddenly... you gave me a fright..."

He must have known. The distance from here to the door was too far. It wasn't me who did it. If so, then who? Thinking that, he wanted the answer to be that I had closed the door. But.

"It wasn't me," I said firmly on purpose. "Remember why you're here. If escaping reality could solve this, there would have been no need to call me. You want to acknowledge what's happening, find the cause, and solve it, right? Then first, calmly

accept the facts as facts and analyze them. Otherwise, you'll only push the solution further away."

"...Ye... yes... you're right..." The trembling in his voice hadn't vanished, but he nodded nonetheless. "For now... I'll open the window to let in some light and air..."

Mr. Lutz went into the living room, unfastened the lock of the shutters covering the window, and opened them while they creaked on their slightly poor fittings. Bright light poured into the room...

Thump... "Ugh...?"

The heavy sound and a woman's groan came from above. We reflexively looked overhead. There was a soot-stained ceiling and a chandelier with noticeable rust. Which meant—

I turned around without a word and headed up the stairs that were in the middle of the hallway!

"W-wait for me!" Mr. Lutz followed in a panic. The two of us stopped in front of the room where the sound had come from. I put my hand on the doorknob. It wasn't locked. The door opened with a small creak. We caught a glimpse of the interior, looked at each other, and nodded.

"Ugh...?"

The groans of me and Mr. Lutz overlapped. It was a bedroom, perhaps for guests. There was only a single bed in the room. A dull red—no, a brownish-red carpet was spread on the floor. And on that brownish-red carpet, a woman with very, very long black hair was lying face down—

"——Just what do you think you're doing!!" *Thwack!*

"Huh what!?"

...Black hair—"Ouch... what on earth!?"

Having taken my heel drop to her back, the woman recoiled and sat up. "Wait, why are you in a place like this!? Lina Inverse!"

"That's my line! Why are you in a place like this, Naga!?"

Long black hair, a black cloak, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace around her neck! Excessively revealing clothes!

I looked down haughtily at the woman who had been sleeping on the second floor—Naga. Naga the Serpent, the living supernatural phenomenon who claimed to be my rival and appeared out of context at every opportunity, and who was far more like a haunting than a real ghost!

I suppose what we heard on the first floor was the sound of this woman falling out of bed and groaning while she slept. And?

"Hmph!" —When I was heading toward this house from the gate, I had a bad feeling, but it must have been my instincts issuing a warning that this person was here.

"...Is she an acquaintance of yours, Miss Lina...?"

"Don't ask me that!" I brushed off Mr. Lutz' prying question and glared at Naga. "This is Mr. Lutz' house! I'm here for a little investigation. What are you doing?"

Upon hearing this, she stood up, put her hands on her hips, and puffed out her chest. "I wouldn't mind telling you if you want to know! I was asked! Last night, I was wandering around wondering what to do about an inn since my funds were low, and then I found a window open in a house that felt like it was inhabited by spirits, so I climbed in and went to sleep! I haven't done a single thing that you should be blaming me for!"

"You've done plenty to be blamed for! Breaking into someone else's house is a legitimate crime!"

"You do it all the time when you're investigating a case!"

"That's because it's for an investigation and can't be helped, so it's fine!"

"Then it's the same for me! It couldn't be helped because I had to save on lodging fees, so it's fine, isn't it!"

"How does that logic even work!? Anyway!"

I cut off my conversation with Naga for a moment and turned toward Lutz.

"So, let's just say that all the paranormal phenomena that have happened so far were all Naga's doing."

"...No, um... Lina-san, didn't you just lecture me about not escaping from reality?"

Tch. He remembered.

"Besides, the idea that it wasn't a ghost, but rather the work of a woman in a strange outfit hiding somewhere in the house, is actually scarier."

Scary? Hmm. Now that he mentioned it, he had a point.

"Also—that Naga person said the window was open, but I definitely locked all the windows from the inside before I went out..."

As Lutz spoke with an air of unease, Naga looked at him with a troubled expression.

"Even if you say that, it was open, so it couldn't be helped. It was practically begging me to come in, so I used a spell to enter from the sky. There was a bed there, so I interpreted it as an invitation to rest freely and just took a nap! Even though you just kicked me out of that bed!"

With that nonsensical complaint, she directed a resentful glare at me.

"Huh? Kicked you out?"

I and Lutz pressed her further.

"Naga! Tell me a bit more about that part where the bed did something!"

"Was there anything else you noticed? I want even the smallest clue!"

Naga frowned at us as we closed in on her.

".....I don't know why you're so hooked on the story of me falling out of bed... more importantly, I haven't heard what you two are doing here yet."

Lutz began to explain the situation to the questioning Naga.

"Hmph. I see. I'll show you the full extent of my power! Regardless of petty details like beds, I'll settle this in one shot!"

The moment she spoke, she began to chant a spell!

"Wait, Naga! I'm telling you now, blowing up the whole house with an attack spell is off-limits!"

I hurriedly cut her off, but Naga completed the spell regardless!

"Purification Flame!"

Lutz looked uneasy hearing that, but Naga, full of pride, let the spell fly.

Momentarily, flames erupted with Naga at the center, swallowing the entire room!

"It's a spell to purify ghosts and undead. It doesn't affect humans or normal objects, so don't worry! See—it's not even hot."

Knowing this spell, I spoke calmly while enveloped in the flames. Reassured by my words, Lutz regained his composure and curiously held his hand over the fire. Eventually, the flames flickered and vanished.

"You can rest easy now, Lutz-or-whatever-your-name-is! If there were any ghosts in this house, that spell just now would have completely obliterated them! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Behind the laughing Naga... *clack*.

...Eh?

The window closed. And the lock clicked.

"....."

Naga groaned, turned around, unlocked the window to open it, and faced us again.

"Tch! If you're going to feign ignorance, you should think of a more plausible excuse, Lina Inverse!"

"Don't 'tch' me! You didn't fool anyone!"

Lutz struggled in surprise.

"I, who pride myself on not falling even when sleeping on a tree branch in the wild, couldn't possibly fall from a mere bed! Or what? Are you suggesting the bed moved on its own and threw me out?"

I and Lutz involuntarily looked at each other at Naga's words.

"Naga! Tell us more about that part!"

"Did anything else happen? Anything!"

"I don't get why you're so interested in me falling out of bed..."

Lutz explained the situation.

"I see. Then my power is essential to solve the phenomenon occurring in this house! Then Naga the White Serpent will—"

I hadn't gone that far, but Lutz leaned forward.

"If you're willing to cooperate, I'll offer a small reward! So please!"

"If you ask so honestly, I can't really refuse! —Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Don't start over!"

Following my retort, Lutz continued in a tired voice.

"It's strange..."

"That's for sure, but..."

Even Naga's words were hesitant.

"Um... excuse me... does that spell just now really work?"

When Lutz asked timidly, Naga's expression flared with offense for an instant, so I spoke up instead.

"I've seen Naga scatter undead with that spell before. Judging by the composition of the 'Chaos Words' used when chanting, it should work on ghosts too. If it didn't, there must be a reason. For example—let's see. Maybe the spell didn't reach downwards, and the ghost's true body or core was on the first floor where it didn't reach. Or maybe the opponent was so strong that one shot wasn't enough to purify it—"

"Hmph! Then the solution is simple! We just have to go down to the first floor and use that spell a few times!"

"That should probably work."

I nodded at Naga's words, and the three of us immediately began the work.

Sunlight poured in through the fully opened windows, lighting up the room. The blowing wind replaced the stagnant air with something fresh. After we all went down to the first floor and Naga kept blasting her purification spells, we opened the doors and windows to clear out the heavy atmosphere while watching for any changes.

For the time being, there was no sign of anything happening. Standing in the middle of the living room by the stone table, we all looked around for abnormalities. The open windows were moving, but that was just the wind. Clouds were starting to appear in the sky beyond the garden trees; it looked like a downpour was coming.

"—But it really is a bleak room."

Looking around, Naga suddenly said something incredibly rude. Well, the crude stone table sitting in the middle of the room and the wall shelves of similar make were certainly stoic and unadorned. Lutz gave a wry smile at the blunt observation.

"Well, part of it is because I'm in the middle of moving, but actually, there were a lot of built-in furniture pieces in the building. Like the bed in the room you were sleeping in, and this table and these shelves too. Honestly, they are a bit inconvenient to use."

I was speechless, but Naga gave a half-hearted acknowledgement. It was probably the hobby of the former owner, an old mage named Defour, but I wondered why he made it like this. Shelves were one thing, but built-in tables and beds seemed incredibly inconvenient for laying down carpets.

While we were doing that, a faint pitter-patter sound came from outside the window.

"It's rain—"

Lutz said, looking at the gray sky. Ah, it finally started. The sound grew stronger, raindrops hitting the leaves.

Slam! Bang! Clatter-clatter-clack!

All at once, the open windows and doors slammed shut, and even though no one had touched them, the locks clicked right before our eyes.

The interior, with its windows shut, was dominated by a thin darkness, and only the sound of the rain played as a noisy static.

"—In other words—"

I was the one who broke the silence.

"—the opponent is still alive and well."

"Then there's only one possibility."

I nodded at Naga's opinion and pointed my right index finger slowly toward the floor.

"It's in the basement."

"—No—but—"

Lutz frowned.

"We don't have a basement... if we did, I would have said so."

"It means there's a basement you don't know about. It’s probably the laboratory of the mage who lived here before. There's definitely a connection between that mage's research and this incident."

"Even if that's the case, where—?"

"Let's just look around for a bit. Follow me."

I thought it would be faster to just make some puppets out of the floor stones or dig up the floor using spells that interfere with earth spirits, but...

"Um, I'll say this in advance, but please spare me from having to peel up the floorboards and dig everything up—"

Tch. He beat me to the punch.

Fine. I started searching the house with the other two.

"Here it is."

Under the light of my magical glow, I stopped in a room facing the hallway. A door on the left. A window on the right. A built-in shelf on the wall in front of me.

"Eh...? Here...?"

Lutz seemed puzzled by my assertion. I examined the shelf in front of me and asked him a question.

"Lutz-san, the first owner of this house was quite old when he died, right?"

"Yes, that's what I heard..."

"If the laboratory was in the basement, he would have had to go up and down all the time. Using a ladder would be tough for an elderly person. So, it's natural to think he used a hidden staircase. To hide a staircase, you need a certain amount of space. I measured it earlier. Two rooms with doors lined up along the hallway. When measured from the hallway, it's a bit over ten steps from this room's door to the next room's door. From the next room's door to this wall, it's just under four steps. From this room's door to this wall, it's also just under four steps. 'Ah—'"

"What do you think those missing two or three steps are for?"

Naga and Lutz let out voices of realization simultaneously.

"It's natural to think a staircase is hidden here. I think the built-in shelf is a switch that opens a hidden door..."

It was hard to imagine a hidden door or switch being anywhere else. The hallway wall facing this spot was the same. Therefore, there had to be something here. I had been investigating for a while, but I hadn't found anything of the sort. I had checked the room next door before coming here, but the single stone wall had no shelves, patterns, indentations, or seams.

I touched the stone shelf in various places, but there was no reaction. Since it was a plain shelf with no decorations, I figured it was the type you had to move.

"—So, haven't you found that switch yet, Lina?"

Being pressured by Naga, who wasn't even trying to help search, I felt a little annoyed.

"If you're going to complain, why don't you look for it too!"

"Even if you say that, there's nowhere else to look in this room."

Naga was right. Perhaps because the move had been interrupted, the room was basically empty. The only thing you could call furniture was the shelf I was currently investigating. In the middle of the room, wooden crates filled with belongings were stacked, but I had checked the floor under them before checking the shelf.

"I understand."

Lutz suddenly placed his hand on the wall in question.

"Please break this wall."

"—Are you sure?"

He nodded at my surprised question.

"Yes. Even if there isn't a staircase here, it's a fact that there's an unnatural space, just as you said, Lina-san. If I leave it alone, it'll bother me later. Rather than spending time finding a switch, I'd rather have you solve this quickly and then I'll just repair the wall later."

"Understood. Everyone, get away from the wall."

As I spoke, I stepped back a few paces, chanted a spell under my breath, and released it!

"Damu Bras! (Vibration Bullet!)"

CRASH!

The single strike shattered the wall in front of us, revealing a dark gloom behind it. It didn't look like the room next door. When we all approached the wall and looked through the hole, sure enough, there was a staircase extending down into the basement.

Our footsteps echoed in the narrow space. Before long, the three of us stopped in front of a single door at the bottom of the hidden stairs. Being in the lead, I reached for the doorknob.

"It won't open. There doesn't seem to be a keyhole, but..."

I glanced at Lutz. Sensing what I wanted to say, he gave a sigh.

"I don't mind. Please break it."

Using the same spell as before, I blew away the area around the knob. When I slowly pulled the door open, a wide, dark space lay beyond.

"Lighting!"

The magical light Naga released illuminated the area. It was a place about two sizes larger than the living room on the first floor.

Numerous shelves and a large desk were there. Grimoires and scrolls were placed haphazardly on the shelves. Among the grimoires, I spotted a few titles I recognized. Scraps of parchment with unfinished writing were scattered about, and on the desk sat a quill with half its feathers missing and an inkwell with rust on its lid.

As he looked at all of this, Lutz murmured softly.

".....The mage who lived in this house... I thought for sure he was researching necromancy or something, but it seems I was wrong."

"How can you tell?"

When I asked, he skimmed the spines of the grimoires nearby.

"I have a friend who's a necromancer... I've been to his library before, but the tendency of the books here is closer to mine than to his. Oh, by the way, I research Golems..."

"Golems?"

I frowned and muttered.

"Forget about that! Look over there!"

Naga’s raised voice struck my eardrums.

"Let’s just get this over with!"

She spat out a rare bit of sound logic and began to chant a spell.

".....What is the meaning of this?" Even Naga had a bewildered look on her face.

The documents were quite old, plagued by stains and dirt, but there were parts I could manage to read. Many words were written in a commanding tone. *'The ideal is still far off.' 'Why won't it listen!' 'What should I do—'* These were the anguished mutterings of the author.

"Could there... be another basement further down...?"

Discovering this room was certainly a harvest, and investigating the documents and grimoires was important, but that was the opinion of Lutz. It would be better to do that after we settled down and exterminated the ghost. I silently looked around at the research books and memos. And then...

"Purification Flame!"

On the parchment atop the desk, there were various scribbles. Naga's spell activated! Without leaving a single scorch mark on the surroundings, the flames licked through the basement space and raced up the hidden stairs. With this, even if the ghost's true body or core was somewhere in this basement, it should have been purified.

I stopped moving when I saw a single sentence at the top of the parchment. Doors and windows that closed and locked on their own. Purification spells that didn't work. The inclination of the grimoires here...

However. *Slam*.

As if mocking us, the door at the bottom of the stairs slammed shut. The three of us froze. Naturally, it wasn't because of the wind. There was no way the purification fire, which didn't affect people or physical matter, could have pushed a door. This meant...

"Come here a second!"

Driven by intuition, I called out.

"What is it, Lina?"

"A clue?"

I pointed to that section of the parchment for the two who had come to my side. They leaned in and read the characters—

"......What is this?" Lutz-san muttered suspiciously. "'Providing a safe and comfortable life even for an elderly person living alone...' What kind of advertising slogan is this?"

"Probably—" I said. "It's an advertisement for this house. I think you'll understand if you properly investigate the research books around here, but there is no ghost here."

"Not here? What do you mean, Lina? Because just now—" Naga looked at the door that had just closed.

"I can't say anything for certain until I examine the materials and memos in this room in detail, but if my guess is correct, everything that’s happened wasn't a ghost, it was the work of this house. Most likely, this house itself is something like a Golem."

"A GOLEM!!"

I nodded at the two of them as they spoke in unison.

"To be precise, it's a partially automated house using Golem-making technology. Needless to say, Golems are made by molding stone or earth into a human shape with the help of earth spirits and giving them simple commands—most likely, he applied that to a building. Actually, many of the grimoires in this room are things owned by mages who research Golems—right? Lutz-san."

"Ah... yeah... that's certainly true, but—"

"It did strike me as odd. Large, seamless slabs of stone were used all over the building. You can't just source stuff like that naturally. But it's a different story if you use an application of Golem-making spells to manipulate earth spirits and create slab-shaped stones."

"Well, it's not a simple technique, but it’s not impossible," Lutz-san added.

I continued. "Probably this house itself is a prototype sample. Doors and windows closed and even locked every time we used a light in the house or Naga used her purification fire. I can infer that it’s executing a command like 'lock up if an artificial light is lit inside the house.' And then, if it rains, it locks up properly. All the other phenomena are just operating under certain conditions according to commands."

"That... is just a hypothesis, isn't it?"

"It's a hypothesis," I nodded at Naga's objection. "But isn't it more natural to think that it's something other than a ghost, rather than thinking there's a ghost that a purification spell won't work on at all? Unless you're saying your spell was so pathetic it couldn't even purify a ghost."

"Th-there's no way that's it!"

"Right? Then if we ask what that 'something else' is, if the original owner was researching Golems, there's a high possibility he was using that technology. If the power at work belongs to earth spirits, it's natural that a necromancer from a completely different field wouldn't be able to sense its presence, and it's natural that spells meant to purify spirits wouldn't work."

While speaking, I started stacking up the nearby grimoires. "Lutz-san, you said that since you moved in, there were times when the doors would open on their own."

"Ah. At first, I thought my family had been thoughtful enough to open them for me, but when I entered the room, no one was there—"

"I see." I held the stacked grimoires in both hands and headed toward the room's door. Naturally, both my hands were full—

The moment I stood in front of it, the door opened with a *creak* all by itself. Just as I expected.

"Could it be that your hands were full like this back then? If my current guess is right, there's no need to be afraid. In fact, it's a rather convenient house."

Saying that, I let a smile play across my face.

In the end, by investigating the materials brought out from the basement, it turned out that the house was indeed exactly as I had imagined. If it rained or if artificial lights were lit indoors, the doors and windows would automatically close and lock. The windows opened for automatic ventilation in response to indoor humidity, temperature, or dust. If someone came with their hands full of luggage, the door would open. If there was someone sleeping, the bed would move to wake them up at a set time. It seemed such commands had been given. For opening and closing some doors, a mechanism had been introduced that would operate if a password was spoken.

Well, since it was in the middle of research, there were many parts that needed improvement in various ways.

Lutz-san became very interested in this house and the research, and decided to take over the study. Upon our parting, Lutz-san showed us his first smile, saying that now that he knew he didn't have to be afraid, he could live here with his wife and children.

According to a story I heard later, Lutz-san completed part of the research he took over, and buildings using that technology apparently gained a reputation among royalty and nobles. Hearing such an outcome, I thought from the bottom of my heart: I should have squeezed more of a commission fee out of him back then.

The Hanging Bridge Bonds

If you opened the door of the shack, you'd find a mountain of thieves' treasure—or so I thought. Instead, there was an old man and an old woman, each gagged and tied down on a mattress.

...Oh boy. I blinked in confusion.

"I'll punish the thieves who harm the world until they cry, and while I'm at it, I'll confiscate the treasure they've hoarded!" That was the plan. And so, today of all days, I knocked out a gang of thieves I happened to cross in the mountains using attack spells, and I asked the one who was still conscious where the treasure was. While saying there wasn't any, he glanced toward a shack standing hidden in the bushes. And when I opened the door, which was little more than a slab of wood, this was the scene.

I suppose they were being held for ransom. There didn't seem to be any treasure at all. In that case...

"Are you all right? I've come to help."

Saying that, I drew my short sword and cut the ropes binding the two.

"—Phew!"

"Phew. We're saved."

Regaining the freedom of their limbs, they each removed their own gags and said, "No, really, thank you very much," in perfect harmony.

"Thanks later. For now, let's get out of here. Can you both walk?"

"Of course."

"Okay. The town of Clamussa is the closest from here, so we'll head there."

The two matched their voices again and nodded at the exact same time.

"We live in that Clamussa, you see," the old man and old woman said in turn. "We" meant they were likely a married couple.

"Oh. That's perfect then."

The whole group went outside the shack, and at the sight of the knocked-out thieves, the old man and old woman widened their eyes.

"Did you do this? Young lady, are you perhaps—"

"Well, I'm a mage, though I might not look it. But there might be some of them left who are unharmed somewhere, so let's head to town quickly."

I spoke and started walking. While walking along the mountain path illuminated by the full moon—

"No, no, it was a help. I am Lawson McKinley. I was taking a stroll in the mountains with my wife here when we were attacked by those fellows."

"I am Martha. When I was captured, I wondered what would happen. Thank you so much. By the way, young lady, what is your name?"

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse. Let's save the calm talk for after we get back to town. Watch your step."

"Indeed. Even so, Martha, that was quite a surprise this time."

"It really was, dear. I was so scared my heart wouldn't stop pounding."

Perhaps out of relief at having escaped, the two whispered to each other behind me. Why is it that the flirting of a young couple is annoying, but the closeness of an old couple is heartwarming? I kept thinking about that as I listened to their exchange behind me, while also wondering how I should bring up the subject of a reward once we reached town.

"I heard you saved my father and mother last night; first, let me offer my thanks."

The next morning. I sat facing a middle-aged man in the drawing room of a large house in the town of Clamussa. He had a square face with a beard, a sturdy build, and

well-tailored clothes. Aldous McKinley. He seemed to be a fairly well-known merchant in this town. The old couple I had saved yesterday were his parents. When I brought the two home, they were naturally delighted; they prepared a room for me to stay the night, and I woke up to a delicious breakfast. And that led to the present moment.

"Still, how should I put it, my parents are a handful. They believe that 'the secret to a happy marriage is for the two of us to experience something exciting together.' If you ask me, they're just mistaking the surge of emotion from a thrill for romantic feelings—

It only seems like the "Suspension Bridge Effect" to me, but regardless, my parents had always been like this. They would suddenly wander off together to climb steep mountains or camp in dangerous spots along the coast. As their son, it kept me in a constant state of anxiety."

"Well, it’s nice they get along, but that does sound a bit worrying."

I offered a non-committal response to what felt like rather pointless small talk. Among the demi-human tribes, some lived quietly, while others caused trouble for humans; the public generally treated them as savages or pests.

"Yes. And the idea of an elderly couple camping on a mountain where such creatures live... well, I haven't heard rumors of those groups causing harm lately, but I still couldn't just overlook it. That said, they aren't the type to listen even if I told them to stop. So, I devised a plan."

"Ho-ho."

Thinking this was going to be a long story, I leaned forward, pretending to be interested. Once the small talk reached a breaking point, he would probably move on to thanking me for helping his parents. Until then, I had to play along.

Aldous gave a wry smile. "Yes. Moreover, lately, things have been escalating. Ever since my father retired, he has had more free time, and simple mountain climbing no longer satisfies him. I hired actors and had them dress up as thugs. Just the other day, a servant noticed and informed me that they were planning a camping trip to a mountain inhabited by goblins."

"Goblin... wait, no matter how you look at it, that’s..."

I frowned. Goblins. Small humanoid creatures that, while not matching humans, possessed a degree of intelligence and culture.

"I had them 'kidnap' my father and mother who were trying to go to that mountain and confined them elsewhere. The plan was to release them after 'extracting' a massive ransom from me. I thought if they realized their hobbies were causing me such trouble, they might restrain their recklessness a bit."

I blinked once.

"...Um... by any chance...?"

As I whispered timidly, Aldous nodded.

"Yes. The group you blasted with your attack spells were the actors I hired."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat!!"

As I recoiled, Aldous continued matter-of-factly.

"Of course, I know it would be cruel to blame you, Lina, as you didn't know the circumstances. Fortunately, everyone was safe."

"Safe? After that!?"

I had hammered them with indiscriminate, wide-range spells like Fireballs...

"According to them, 'I thought I was going to die, but I covered it with my acting skills.'"

"That is not a problem you can cover with acting skills!"

Wasn't it more likely they were just acting like they were fine while they were actually reeling from the pain...?

"I don't know much about theater myself, but that is what they said. At any rate, from the stories of my parents and the actors, I've learned that you are a highly skilled mage. Which brings me to a request. My father and mother will likely try to go camping on that goblin mountain again. When they do, I want you to act as their guard from the shadows. If you accept, I won't hold you responsible for blowing up the actors, and I'll pay the guard fee as well. ...What do you say?"

Of course, the moment I realized I’d blown up a bunch of actors—even unknowingly—I didn't exactly have the right to say no.

"For now, let's talk about the conditions in detail..."

In the end, that was what I said.

The mountain was a deep, lush green. I followed an animal trail carved into the brush and grass. Eventually, after walking for a while, a goblin settlement came into view. Even calling it a settlement, it was quite different from a human one. They were mere shacks—no, not even shacks—just haphazardly made rain covers using branches, leaves, and vines. The only thing resembling furniture was a water jar with its top half smashed off. They probably picked it up from somewhere after humans threw it away.

From a quick glance, there were about twenty goblins. After accepting Aldous's request, I had set out for the mountain immediately. Initially, I thought I'd just head in first and wipe out the goblins to solve the problem. But my mind changed as soon as I found this settlement after only a short search. I didn't think they would intentionally build a village in a place where humans could easily find them. That meant there were likely multiple settlements across this mountain. In other words, crushing just this one wouldn't solve anything; it would only provoke them. If anything, it would endanger the elderly couple who would be arriving later.

Left with no choice, I stood up from the bushes where I had been hiding and walked straight toward the goblin settlement with my head held high. Noticing me, the goblins stopped moving one by one and began to stare. Once I had gathered enough attention, I raised my voice.

"Don't worry," I said in the goblin tongue.

To tell the truth, I could actually speak Goblin. I had learned it half for fun a while back, but I never expected it to be useful in a place like this.

"I have no intention of attacking. I want to talk. Is there a leader?"

I looked around. Now, would they come out? If they attacked suddenly, I’d just have to beat them back. After a brief silence, one goblin stepped forward.

"Talk? What is it?"

Aside from a rusty dagger hanging at its waist and a few scraps of cloth and fur, its appearance wasn't much different from the others, but I assumed this was the representative.

"I have a request. I think a pair of elderly humans will be coming to this mountain soon, and I don't want you to harm them."

"A pair of old humans? For what?"

Of course, I couldn't explain that they were doing it for fun.

"They said it was a tradition. I don't know the details," I said, making something up on the spot.

"A tradition, huh..."

The goblin thought for a moment, then looked up as if noticing something.

"By the way, what do those old humans look like?"

"What do they... well..."

I was at a loss for an answer. It would be difficult for a goblin of a different species to distinguish human faces. I had to describe their general appearance instead, but I had no way of knowing what kind of clothes that old couple would be wearing when they entered the mountain. Forced to try, I recalled their features.

"...Um... I don't know what clothes they'll be wearing, but they're a man and a woman, both have white hair... and they're about the same height as me..."

I trailed off, finding it difficult to describe. Then the goblin spoke.

"Are you talking about the two humans I saw earlier, clinging to the cliff and looking like they were about to fall?"

"WHAAAAT!?"

I screamed in my own language before hurriedly switching back to Goblin.

"There were people like that? It might be them! Where is that cliff!?"

The goblin pointed. "You can't see it from here. Go straight that way until you see a large oak tree. Turn north there and go a little further."

"Thanks! I'll go check it out!"

I didn't even wait for a reply. I chanted a spell.

"Raywing!"

I cast the high-speed flight spell, surrounding myself with a barrier of wind. I dashed in the direction I was told. A short flight brought me to the large oak. Turning north and going a bit further, the trees cleared to reveal a brown rock face.

There, halfway up the rock, were two silhouettes clinging to the side! Either she had slipped or the foothold had crumbled, but the old woman was hanging on! This was bad. If either of them fell, I couldn't exactly help them "from the shadows." I was still too far away to see their faces clearly, but there was no way this was a different pair of people trying to climb a cliff at the exact same time.

Approaching to a certain distance, I remembered the condition of "guarding from the shadows," so I landed in the bushes at the base of the cliff and canceled the spell. As the wind barrier vanished, the sounds of the surroundings rushed in. The wind blowing across the cliff. And mixed in with it, human voices.

"Are you alright, Mother!?"

"Yes! I'm fine, Father!"

It was undoubtedly the voices of Lawson and Martha! It really was them! They were supposed to be there at breakfast! Looking at the timing, they must have left the house while Aldous and I were discussing the guard job. Still, to go mountain climbing in a goblin-infested area the day after being "kidnapped" as if nothing had happened... their footwork was way too light! And why were they climbing a cliff of all things!?

Regardless, I couldn't just not help them because the "from the shadows" condition seemed impossible. All I could do was prepare to save them while praying they wouldn't fall. Looking up, it was a sheer cliff—not quite vertical, but steep enough that regaining balance after a slip would be impossible. The old man was near the top. The old woman was a bit below him. They were scrambling up, using protruding

rocks for handholds. To climb a cliff like that at their age required impressive stamina, but that was only "for their age." In reality, their pace was far from fast.

I stood there anxiously watching, a spell at the ready on my lips. After a long—yet short—time, the old man’s hand finally reached the top of the cliff. He managed to haul himself up. I let out a sigh of relief.

But the old woman was still there. This was dangerous.

"Levitation!"

This was also a flight spell. The difference from the one I used earlier was that it had no wind barrier and moved slowly, but it could lift a decent amount of weight. One might think I should have used the previous spell, but that would be a mistake. Doing that would have blown the person I was trying to save away with the wind barrier. I had to make up for the lack of speed with effort!

As soon as the spell activated, I kicked off the ground and jumped toward the cliff. Using that momentum, I kicked off the slope again to gain speed. It gave me a significant boost, but I couldn't say it was enough. Would I make it in time!?

Looking up, the old man leaned over the edge of the cliff, reaching out to the old woman as she lost her balance.

"Mother! Fight!"

The old woman reached out with gusto.

"I—!"

The moment she tried to say something, her foot slipped again, and this time she completely lost her footing!

No! Am I going to make it!?

I kicked off the cliff one more time, heading toward her as she began to slide! Then, halfway down, she suddenly stopped. I didn't know what happened, but rescue came first! I grabbed her from behind and began a gentle ascent.

"—Oh! Is that you?"

"Wha? What is this?"

The old man saw my face, and the old woman, not understanding the situation, cried out. Regardless, I landed them safely at the top. To welcome us, the old man’s first move was a thumbs-up.

"Mother, that was a 'Nice Thrill'!"

"It wasn't a 'Nice Thrill' at all!" I shouted with everything I had. "The grandmother almost fell! Have a little concern!"

"Oh, no, Lina."

The old woman tugged on the edge of my cloak.

"There's no need to worry. Look, see?"

I looked down and saw a brown rope in her hand. It was tied around her waist and stretched... back up to the top of the cliff?

I hadn't noticed the rope because it was the same color as the rock. I see... that's fine, but...

"Wait a minute. Why is the lifeline coming from the top of the cliff? Weren't you both just climbing up?"

The two of them exchanged mischievous smiles.

"We set it up," the old woman said.

"Huh? But—"

"Well, to tell you the truth," the old man started, "we believe the secret to a happy marriage is to go out together and experience all sorts of thrills."

I’d heard that part from Aldous. I couldn't say that, of course. Then the old woman added shyly...

“It might seem a bit inappropriate for our age,” she said, “but this is our secret to staying healthy and active. Well, yesterday we tried to climb this mountain, but while we were walking the path, we got caught by bandits. That was when you saved us, Miss Lina.”

The old man continued, “Essentially, we couldn’t finish the climb yesterday. It’s been sitting wrong with me ever since. So, today, the two of us decided to have a ‘revenge’

climb. That's when we found this cliff and thought we'd play a little game of 'falling'..."

If these were my relatives, my stomach would be dissolving from the stress!

"What do you mean, 'playing at falling'?! My heart nearly stopped just watching you!" I shouted.

"Isn't that thrill just wonderful, Mother?"

"It certainly is, Father."

"Like hell it is!" I snapped back with a full-force retort. "I agree that life needs a moderate amount of stimulation, but this is clearly over the line! If you two were former master warriors or adventurers skilled in survival, that would be one thing! But since you got caught so easily by bandits yesterday, that's obviously not the case!"

"But we're perfectly fine, Miss Lina," they said in a carefree tone.

"What's the basis for that confidence?!" I shot back immediately.

The two of them looked at each other and smiled. Then they turned back to me and said in perfect unison, "Just a feeling."

"'Just a feeling'?! That's exactly what I'm worried about! Statistically, the people who cause accidents aren't the ones who think things are dangerous—it's the ones who brainlessly assume they'll be fine!"

"Now, now, Miss Lina."

"There's no need to get so worked up."

"Don't make it sound like I'm the bad guy here!" I yelled, huffing and puffing.

They didn't seem to understand what I was trying to say at all, as they just exchanged puzzled looks. I took a moment to catch my breath and calm my nerves.

"...Fine. Actually, I came to this mountain looking for herbs to use as ingredients for a certain magical potion," I lied, making it sound like a chance encounter. "I'm worried, so I'm going to accompany you on your climb."

Since acting as a hidden guard was no longer an option, I decided to just follow them openly, keeping the part about Aldas's request a secret!

"Eh? Wait a minute, Miss Lina," the old man said. "That's..."

As I expected, they both looked troubled by my declaration.

"You are certainly a skilled mage. I'm sure you'd save us if anything happened, but..."

"We came here to experience the thrill. If we have a reliable guard and feel too safe, then..."

"..."

"What are you talking about?" I dismissed their protest as if it were nothing. "You're saying the thrill is your own responsibility. Well, I'm saying it's my own responsibility that I want to guard you. Whether you can enjoy your thrill or not is none of my business. It's the same thing, right?"

"But still..."

Suddenly, a sound that wasn't a human voice cut the old man off. To an untrained ear, it would have sounded like a beast's growl, but it was the Goblin language.

"Hey! Humans! Go home now!"

From behind the bushes atop the cliff, about ten goblins appeared, rustling the leaves. They weren't the same ones from the village earlier; the color and style of their rags were different. More importantly, they were armed with crude spears and battered bows. They didn't seem murderous yet, but the air was tense. Perhaps they were angry that we had entered their territory.

One goblin, holding a spear, barked at us again. I glanced over at the old couple—and saw their eyes sparkling as they watched the goblins.

"Mother! It's goblins! And they have weapons!"

"How exciting, Father!"

These people were truly hopeless! Honestly, putting the request aside, I wanted to just leave them and go home, but Aldas was too pitiful for me to do that. So, what now? At any rate, getting into a fight with goblins here would be a terrible move.

“We have no ill intent,” I said in the Goblin language.

“Oh! Miss Lina, can you speak Goblin?”

“How impressive.”

The two in the back were making comments based on the "vibe" of the situation. The spear-holding goblin looked surprised.

“You understand us? Then this is simple. Leave this mountain immediately. It’s for your own sake. We don’t want trouble. You don’t want to be attacked by a griffon, do you? Your friends already went home.”

“We don’t intend to disturb your territory,” I replied.

“It’s not about territory. A while ago, a griffon came from somewhere and settled on this mountain.”

“A griffon?” I asked.

A griffon—an eagle's head on a lion's body. They were ferocious carnivores known to snatch horses, though humans and goblins were also on the menu. It was rare for one to appear so close to human settlements.

The goblin lowered his spear slightly. *“If a human gets attacked by a griffon here, other humans will blame us. Then the soldiers will come. So leave, quickly.”*

I looked back, but the old couple was nowhere to be seen. To leave without being spotted by the goblins, they would have had to go down the cliff.

“They went home? You mean they went down the cliff?”

“Yeah. As soon as I mentioned the griffon, they used their ropes to climb down.”

I looked down the cliff. They were gone; only the two safety ropes swayed in the wind. Even if it was true they had left this spot, why so suddenly? I didn't think they were the type to get scared of the word "griffon." Besides, if they didn't know the Goblin language, it would have just been noise to them.

Unless...

A bad feeling crawled up my spine. It occurred to me: what if those two knew the Goblin language? Earlier, they had been impressed that I could "speak" it—but maybe they weren't guessing based on the vibe, but actually understood the conversation? If they knew there were goblins here, maybe they came because they were confident they could communicate?

If that was the case...

“This is bad!” I turned back to the goblins. *“The two people with me didn't run away! They probably went to go see the griffon!”*

“Wh-What?!” the goblins cried out in shock.

“Why would anyone do something that stupid?!”

“Let’s go take down that griffon together. If we do, my companions won't be attacked, and you can live in peace.”

For me, this was actually a chance! I didn't have time to explain the couple’s weird hobby. If I could get the goblins to lead me to where the beast was, I could remove the biggest threat. And if my hunch was right and the old couple had gone "griffon-watching," I’d likely run into them along the way.

The goblins whispered among themselves for a moment. *“Can you really kill a griffon?”*

“Leave it to me.”

“Fine. We’ll guide you. Follow us.”

And so, the goblins and I headed deeper into the mountain.

As we traveled, the mountain's atmosphere changed. The greenery remained the same, but the birds had gone silent. They had either fled or were holding their breath. Because of the sparse trees, the sky was visible, but that also meant anything in the sky could see us. The only sounds were the wind and the rustling leaves.

Then, the wind grew louder. We all looked up at the same time.

Whoosh!

The treetops swayed violently as a winged shadow crossed the sky. A griffon! It looked about the size of a small dragon—larger than I had imagined. It passed overhead, circled in the distance, and then turned back toward us.

“Get ready!” the lead goblin shouted to his comrades. The archers frantically notched arrows, but I knew those rickety bows wouldn't do much.

I began chanting. Dragon Slave—the ultimate spell capable of slaughtering even a dragon! Even a grazing blow would finish a griffon. The black wings arched across the blue sky before the beast used gravity to accelerate into a dive. It grew larger by the second.

My spell was complete!

“Dragon—”

I was about to release the "Words of Power" when I realized something. It wasn't targeting us. Its flight path was clearly aimed elsewhere.

I frantically shifted my aim and released the spell!

“—Slave!”

BOOM!

The sky exploded. I had detonated the spell in the empty space just above the griffon. The blast wave slammed into its wings, knocking it toward the ground. It wasn't a direct hit, so I wasn't sure if I’d finished it, but it definitely took a heavy blow.

I had realized that if I hit the griffon directly while it was at such a low altitude, I risked catching the old couple in the explosion if they were right underneath it.

“She missed!” the goblin shouted.

“Let’s go!” I yelled, already running.

The goblins kept pace with me.

“It’s still moving, Mother!”

“It’s looking right at us, Father!”

Those voices! They were coming from just ahead. From the sound of it, the griffon was still alive and right next to them!

“I’m coming! Just wait!”

My shout wasn't so much a call for help as it was a warning to the griffon. It was a declaration of intent: if it kept messing with the old couple in front of me, the person who caused that explosion would be coming for it. A wild beast should have sensed the danger by instinct. However, the next sounds to rise were the voices of the two seniors.

"Is that Miss Lina?!"

"The griffon headed your way!"

It’s coming!

The king of the skies chose attack over retreat! At my word, the goblins stopped in their tracks and braced themselves. I drew my short sword while chanting a spell, and the trees began to shudder. A shadow raced from the depths of the thick forest—it had the sturdy limbs of a beast and the ferocity of an eagle's face. It closed in on us with erratic movements, kicking off the ground and the trunks of standing trees!

Its fighting spirit was commendable. But the wings on its back were already broken and crushed. The battle had been decided the moment I unleashed the Dragon Slave. Sorry, but I wasn't in the mood to give it a starring role. Toward the proud beast charging at me, I released the spell I had been chanting.

"Honestly! What were you thinking?! Both of you!"

The moment he finished hearing the story, Mr. Aldous snapped at his parents. It was sometime after the sun had begun to sink in the west when the three of us—the old couple and I—descended the mountain and returned to town. I thought they might insist on staying up there, but perhaps they were satisfied by the encounter with the griffon, because they followed me down quietly. Being lectured by the goblins to "just go home already" probably helped push them along too.

Regardless, Aldous was absolutely furious after hearing the details in the drawing room. Well, that’s no surprise. Yet, far from being discouraged, the two of them spoke with lingering excitement.

"Now, now, Aldous. Seeing a griffon up close... that was something else. Wasn't it, dear?"

"Oh, yes. My heart was really thumping, old man."

Zero remorse.

"That’s not the point! Do you realize your selfish behavior is causing trouble for others?! Even today, do you know how much trouble you've caused Miss Lina?!"

At his words, the two of them looked at me with blank expressions and said in unison:

"—Did we?"

Zero self-awareness! Of course, social pleasantries were unnecessary here. If I accidentally let it slip that "it was no big deal," they would definitely take it seriously and grow even more emboldened.

I gave a heavy nod. "It was a massive pain in the neck."

When I answered, the two of them nodded back.

"See there, Aldous?"

"She says she was fine."

"I did not say that."

...These two...

"Enough of this!"

Seeing his parents' blatant attempt to laugh it off, even the patient Aldous raised his voice in genuine anger.

"You might think it’s your heart’s desire to die doing what you love, but you are dead wrong! If Miss Lina hadn't been there and you two had lost your lives, I would have assumed it was the work of the mountain goblins and petitioned the officials! I would have demanded they exterminate every last one of them! That would have turned into a small war! People would have died! I’m saying your selfish actions could lead to actual deaths! Do you understand?!"

The mention of actual deaths brought a heavy silence to the room for a while. Then, I spoke up.

"So..."

Naturally, the two of them had no choice but to stay quiet. I continued while looking at the son sitting across the table.

"Do you realize that the person you're worrying and straining more than anyone else is your own son, Aldous? When you were young, back when Aldous was just a kid, surely there was at least one time he played out late and made you worry?"

The two of them blinked, their eyes wavering. Eventually, the old man spoke.

"Now that you mention it... when Aldous was about three, he hid in a merchant caravan’s cargo and went all the way to the neighboring country. When he was caught for illegal entry, I was so worried I thought my heart would stop."

"I still can't forget the time he was caught," the old woman added.

"You're making Aldous feel that exact same worry right now, you know?"

The two of them nodded with looks of realization.

"That's right. We've only been thinking about the bond between husband and wife, but the bond between parent and child is important too. Miss Lina, thank you. You've opened my eyes."

"I’m more reminded of when Aldous was starting out and planned that reckless trade by ship, ended up shipwrecked, and his status was unknown for a year... Anyway, from now on, the three of us will stick together and face all sorts of death-defying situations as a family."

Wait, I have a feeling Aldous himself is usually pretty reckless too.

".....Uh....."

"We were putting Aldous through that same feeling... I’m sorry I didn't realize how much worry it causes when a family member does something reckless out of your sight, Aldous."

Seeing his parents finally reflecting, Aldous's expression finally softened.

".....Do you understand now? Father, Mother?"

"Yes, yes. Aldous. We won't leave you alone to worry anymore."

"That’s right. From now on, when we go on adventures, the three of us will go together!"

"Eh?"

For a second, Aldous and I both groaned at the same time, not processing what had just been said.

"Well, now that you've reached an understanding, I'll leave you to your family time!"

I stood up with a beaming smile.

"I'll come by to say hello again tomorrow."

In other words, I was saying, *'I can't deal with this, so I'm leaving. I'll come get my pay tomorrow.'* Judging by his expression, Aldous probably got the message. If so, I had no further business here.

"Wait...?! Wait, wait....."

"Thank you, Miss Lina."

"You were truly a great help."

Leaving Aldous's confusion and the parents' greetings behind me, I left the mansion without hesitation. It seemed Aldous's real battle was only just beginning.

The Order to Destroy the Secret Base!

A heavy atmosphere dominated the room. Only two people were present: myself, Lina Inverse, and the Council Chairman of the Sorcerers' Association, Alto Fritz.

"Huh?"

Despite being elderly, his large build, flaming wavy hair, and sharp gaze would have intimidated anyone weak-willed just by standing in front of him. I had stopped by the town of Sildra and popped into the Sorcerers' Association to give a greeting, which was when he approached me saying he had a private matter to discuss.

In a small room deep within the association building, Chairman Fritz finally spoke after a long silence, the wrinkles of distress etched into his brow.

"The matter is none other than this. Miss Lina Inverse, I would like you to destroy the children's secret base."

Naturally, I asked for clarification.

"The kids' secret base...?"

"Indeed. The children's secret base."

He nodded with a grave expression.

"My son, Lito, and our Tenor and Sophie are all seven years old this year. They always play together happily. They are the children of the two Vice-Chairmen, Kind and Reinbelt. My Lito is as cute as an angel and so smart it surprises even me. I'm certain they will all grow up to be great figures everyone envies. By the way, are you more interested in your split ends than my story?"

"Yeah. Extremely. Oh, don't mind me, keep going."

"Understood."

I prodded him to continue while messing with my hair. He really did continue without a care, not even slightly fazed by my "zero interest" gesture.

"They are energetic children, after all. Not satisfied with just running around town, they often head to the nearby forests and mountains. It seems the three of them built a secret base in the mountains. Building it where adults can't find it—they've got spirit. My son Lito is a clever boy, so he thought of many things and gradually improved the base's gimmicks and facilities."

"Uh-huh." Oh. A split end.

"As a result, that secret base gained a will of its own and started moving."

Pfft!

"—Wait—what?"

Having something so impossible dropped so casually made me spit out a laugh.

"Will... a will?!"

"The children were overjoyed. However, having such a thing in the mountains..."

"No, no, wait, hold on a second! Don't just gloss over the 'gained a will' part!"

When I stopped the Chairman as he tried to breeze past it, he quirked a single eyebrow.

"You told me to keep going regardless, so I did."

I had no choice but to straighten up.

"I'm more interested in this than my split ends now. But a secret base gaining a will? How on earth did that happen?!"

"I suspect that because my Lito is too clever, the various things he installed just happened to play the role of a soul. My word, my own child is truly fearsome."

At that point, I realized two things: the Chairman was an extreme doting parent, and asking him further was a waste of time.

"So, you want me to destroy that secret base?"

"Exactly. The children are thrilled that the base moved. However, due to its massive size, having it wander the mountains naturally makes the local residents uneasy, scares off the animals, and troubles the hunters. In fact, complaints have already come in. Fortunately, nothing has happened yet, but there's no telling when an accident might occur. It will be too late to act once that happens. I want you to find a time when the children aren't there and completely destroy it. If the rumors about Lina Inverse are true, it should be possible for you. Though, of course, never tell the children I was the one who asked."

Certainly, if I just let loose an appropriate attack spell, it wouldn't be hard to demolish a secret base made by kids. Provided I didn't let my conscience get in the way. The reward the Chairman offered afterward wasn't bad, but more than that, I was curious about a secret base that had gained a will and started moving.

"Okay. If you're leaving the methods to me, I'll take the job."

The Chairman nodded with a look of relief at my answer.

The mountain was still rich with green despite being exposed to the cold winter wind. Thanks to the many evergreens, it was easy on the eyes, but visibility wasn't great. I had dressed a bit warmly, but it was still chilly. Fortunately, it didn't look like I'd have to wander around searching for the base. I had been given a rough location by the Chairman.

As I walked along the mountain path, it wasn't long before I found a gap in the shrubs on the side—the way to the base. I found the spot exactly as described and stepped into the bushes. What kind of "secret" base is it if the parents already know the location? Was it too conspicuous to hide, did the kids blabber about it themselves, or did the doting Chairman follow them out of worry?

The shrubs made visibility poor, and the path was little more than a game trail. If I wasn't careful, I might lose my way. Regarding the appearance of the base, the Chairman had said I'd know it when I saw it, but if it blended into the scenery...

It was the kind of thing where, if it had been normal, I might have just walked right past it without a second thought. I kept moving forward, wondering if it would really be that obvious, when the brush thinned out and the view opened up.

I froze for a second, lost for words.

There was a tree standing a little distance away. Thick vines wound around its brown trunk and green leaves flourished on the branches, but the way those leaves were growing was utterly and completely unnatural. It looked like someone had taken a giant sphere and forcibly plastered leaves all over its surface. It was a dense, fluffy mass shaped exactly like a painted afro.

"You really *can* tell just by looking!"

The moment I shouted that at the top of my lungs, the green sphere gave a loud rustle and shook. Then, the voices of children drifted out from inside.

"Someone said something!"

"Shh!"

"It’s okay! They haven't found us!"

"How could I *not* find you?! Where on earth do you see a tree that grows leaves like a giant hairball?! No matter how you look at it, it's overflowing with weirdness!"

When I yelled that back, the green fluff rustled and shook once more—followed by silence.

No, wait. If I strained my ears, I could hear the faint sound of children whispering to each other. Before long, the bottom of the green hairball—or maybe I should call it a leaf-ball—opened up, and something like an entrance appeared. It looked like they had stuck leaves onto the surface of a wooden door. A rope slid down from the opening, and three children scrambled down one after another, grunting as they climbed.

"Whoa, wait, the rope—"

"You okay?"

"Lito, you really need to get used to this already."

Chatting away, they made it safely to the ground and lined up in a row. From where I stood, there was a black-haired girl on the left. In the middle was a boy with short blonde hair, and on the right was a red-headed boy. The kid in the middle looked just a tiny bit taller than the other two.

Since they had called the red-headed boy "Lito" just now, that probably meant the one in the middle was Tenor and the girl was Sophie. Their clothes weren't poorly made, but from running around the area, they were dirty and frayed in spots. Even Sophie was dressed in practical trousers.

The kid in the middle, likely Tenor, raised his voice, followed by the red-headed boy, presumably Lito.

"Hmph! I'm impressed you found our secret base!"

"We shall praise your power of sight."

"So, big sister, who are you?"

Sophie's question caught me off guard.

Damn it. I had ended up heckling them with everything I had because the secret base looked so completely devoid of any intent to hide, but my original plan was to keep my distance and observe for a while. Of course, I couldn't exactly tell them I was here to destroy the base. In that case...

"I'm a traveling sorceress, as you can see. My name is Lina. I was walking off the path when I saw this... incredibly fluffy, unnatural thing, and I just had to say something. Did you say 'secret base'?"

When I asked, Tenor gave a smug grin and puffed out his chest with pride. "Yeah! Pretty great, isn't it?"

However, I intentionally kept my tone cool. "...Hmm... it's not bad, I guess... but the secret bases I know about were much bigger, with libraries and chandeliers and stuff."

"What?!"

The three voices overlapped at my blatant lie. Lito and Sophie sounded interested, while Tenor sounded defensive.

"T-that's nothing special! Our secret base is way better than that!"

He raised his voice, his shoulders squared in defiance. Even so, I gave him a skeptical look. "Hmm... well, how exactly is it better?"

"Our secret base is—!"

"Tenor."

"Secret."

Lito cut off the blabbing Tenor, and Sophie added her warning.

"Ah. Right." Tenor snapped back to his senses. "I'm not gonna tell you!"

...Tsk. So close.

I was, of course, trying to provoke the kids into bragging about the base's secrets. If provocation didn't work...

"Haha! I knew it! It’s not actually that great!"

"It *is* great!"

As Tenor snapped back, I looked down at him with a dismissive gaze. "Well, if you tell me how it's great, I'll tell you about that other secret base I saw. It had something amazing! Something big and sparkly—"

I cut myself off. The silence didn't last long.

"Sparkly what?" Sophie asked impatiently.

Yes. She bit.

"I told you, right? If you tell me about yours, I'll tell you about mine."

"We'll show you, so step back," Lito said.

"Okay."

I didn't really know what was happening, but I stepped back as told. I didn't see the point in them climbing down just to climb back up again, but the three of them used the rope to scale the green fluff once more. Eventually, they were all inside, the door closed, and Tenor’s voice drifted down.

"Stay back, lady!"

Right after that... it rose.

The ground shook. The green mass began to ascend, pushed up by a tree trunk that was rapidly growing from beneath it. Not only that—

I stepped back further instinctively. Even the other trees growing nearby began to shoot upward. The ground peeled back, and as the trees grew, twisted, and entangled themselves...

"Whaaaaaaaat?!"

What stood before me was a giant made of wood and earth. The giant struck a pose with both hands.

"Completion! The Ultimate Secret Base: Seafood!"

The three children's voices echoed in a chorus I hadn't heard before.

"—I said—WHAT ON EARTH IS THIS?!"

I couldn't help but scream.

The green fluff where the children were—the core of the secret base—now served as a single eye. The figure was a stocky giant clad in armor made of soil over muscles made of wood!

But the problem was its size! It could probably take on a small dragon with ease. I finally understood why the Council Chairman was so worried. At this size, just moving around would be a catastrophe. If it ever happened to fall over—

"How's that! You see that, lady! Isn't it awesome!"

A small window opened in the core, and Tenor poked his head out, his voice triumphant. I looked up at him and honestly threw up my hands in defeat.

"No! It's... it's way too awesome!"

"Go on, you were saying? Can you even climb up here?"

"I lose! I'll tell you about the secret base I know, just like I promised—but we can't really talk like this, so can I come up there?"

"Of course."

I answered Tenor immediately and began chanting a spell.

"Levitation!"

I floated gently into the air. The children cheered at the sight. I controlled the spell and floated up to the front of the core. Addressing their stunned faces, I asked:

"Uh, yeah! Is it okay? It's kind of hard to talk while floating, so would you mind letting me in?"

In response to Tenor's question, the other two nodded.

"Hmm? Is it alright to let her in?"

That was the fourth voice again, the one I didn't recognize. It sounded like a young man, but the Chairman hadn't mentioned anyone else being with the children.

However, Lito looked toward the back of the core and said, "Yeah, it’s fine, Seafood."

For some reason, he was addressing a piece of shellfish.

"Then come in through here, big sister."

Sophie spoke, and the three of them vanished from the window. I approached the window and slid inside feet-first.

The interior was a total shack. It wasn't spherical inside, but square—a square room wrapped in a ball of green leaves. The walls were made of planks of all different lengths. The space was fine for three kids to play in, but there wasn't much room to relax. In the back, you could see the tree trunk; they must have built the room around it as a core. It felt exactly like a base built by children, but it seemed surprisingly sturdy; the floor didn't feel flimsy when I stepped on it.

The magical light glowing on the ceiling was probably something one of the three had been taught by their parents. Scattered around were pretty stones, mugs, an "oath" written on a piece of wood, a teddy bear tied to the tree trunk, small wooden boxes serving as chairs, and old blankets.

"Welcome to our secret base."

"I'm Sophie-Arl. You can call me Sophie."

"I'm Tenor. I hate it when people shorten my name, so make sure you call me Tenor."

"........U-um..... Lito."

The kids introduced themselves in order—Sophie, Tenor, and Lito. I nodded vaguely at the introductions I already knew.

"And my name is Seafood."

Along with the fourth voice, the teddy bear raised a hand. My mind went blank.

"Yeah! Isn't he cool!"

As I muttered in a daze, Tenor looked immensely proud. "He's the biggest secret of our base—Seafood the bear!"

"He used to be my teddy bear," Sophie said. "But we all prayed to God together, and he became able to talk and move. That's why we gave him God's name."

"God's name...? You mean... could it be the Red Dragon God, Ceifeid?"

"Your pronunciation is wrong. It's *Seafood*."

They had probably named him that based on a half-remembered name or a misunderstanding, but if the bear himself was happy with it, I felt it would be kinder to keep quiet. Still, I see. So this was the source of the fourth voice. The bear wasn't just tied to the trunk; he was integrated with the secret base itself.

"You said he started moving after you prayed to God, but where and how did you ask?"

The Council Chairman wanted the base destroyed above all else, but I, being a sorceress of sorts—even if I was just acting the part—wanted to know the cause behind all this. The children seemed to think it was thanks to God, but that obviously wasn't it. Still, listening to their story might give me a lead.

"I prayed that my bear would be able to talk. I prayed here and at home," Sophie said.

"I asked for our base to be cooler. At home, mostly," Tenor added.

"Me too. I said I wanted all sorts of cool, moving gimmicks," Lito chimed in.

"What about at a church?"

When I asked, the three of them shook their heads in unison. "If we asked there, everyone would find out about our secret base!"

"I see..."

So it was mostly here and at home. I looked at the teddy bear. "Ceife—I mean, Seafood. Do you know how you were born?"

The bear pressed his right hand to his forehead and slowly shook his head. "What a foolish question. Is there even a single person among your humanity who remembers the moment they were created?"

"That's right. When was that, again?"

"You know, remember when we went shopping with my mom and everyone? It was the day after that."

"Right. When we came the next day, Seafood talked. We were so surprised!"

The children spoke all at once.

Hmm. So Seafood was born on a day the children couldn't come here. If that's the case, then maybe—

"Hey. Were your fathers with you on that shopping trip?"

"No, they didn't come. ...But anyway, lady, more importantly, tell us that story you promised about the secret base you know!"

"Oh, right. Well, that place I know is—"

Urged on by Tenor, I proceeded to spin a completely made-up story for them.

The next day, I showed up at the Sorcerers' Association and was talking to Council Chairman Fritz in the same room as before.

"Well, I did a bit of scouting," I said, smiling across the small table. "Oh, by the way, I spoke with Lito for a little bit. He's a bright kid."

"Isn't he?"

The Chairman's face instantly broke into a grin. "I shouldn't say it as his father, but favoritism aside, that boy is truly intelligent. Being that clever at seven, there's no doubt he'll surpass the gods when he grows up."

Surpass the gods?!

I desperately wanted to call him out on his total "doting parent" nonsense, but I held it in for now. "Then you must absolutely adore him. I bet you'd do anything for Lito's sake, wouldn't you?"

"Hahaha. Certainly, if it makes Lito happy."

"Is that why you cast some kind of spell on their secret base?"

The Chairman's expression visibly twitched the moment I said it.

"So it was you after all, wasn't it?" I said.

Before he could react, I pressed on. "And I'm guessing it wasn't just you. Sophie and Tenor's fathers probably did the exact same thing."

"What?! Them too?!"

"Aha! You just said 'them too,' didn't you?" I smirked.

The Council Chairman groaned, but it was too late to take it back.

"Since you're such a doting father," I continued, "I figured you'd been keeping a close eye on Lito this whole time." I didn't know if he'd been tailing the kid himself or ordering someone else to do it, but the result was the same. "You knew all about the secret base, where it was, and that Lito wanted to power it up. You planned it as a surprise gift. You waited for the day the kids went out shopping, snuck over to the base, and cast some kind of spell on it. But you messed up the 'Giant Growth' spell, and in a panic, you asked me to destroy the base before you got caught—"

However, contrary to his expectations, the secret base had gained a will of its own and grown far larger than intended.

As he fell into a bitter silence, I kept going. "Of course, it's hard to believe a simple spell meant to please a kid would turn into something that massive just because of one little mistake. But... Sophie and Tenor's fathers are also Vice-Chairmen of this

Association. What if those two were thinking the exact same thing out of love for their kids? What if they all cast spells on the secret base on the same day?"

"The spells... interfered with each other?"

"It happens," I told him. "I've had cases where one attack spell clashed with another and they both just vanished. It doesn't always happen with multiple spells, but in this case, I'd say the odds are pretty high."

"......Mmm..... I see....."

The Chairman didn't even try to hide his involvement anymore, his face twisted in a grimace.

"To think the other parents cast spells too... So it's their fault in the end. Good grief, the doting idiocy of those men is staggering."

"You're one of them!" I yelled. "Anyway! First, we're going to confirm this with the Vice-Chairmen. Lili, if they're at the Association right now, go call them in."

"—No—but—"

"Do it, or I'll tell Lito you're the one who ordered me to destroy his base."

"I understand! I'll go get them right now!" At my words, he practically bolted from his seat.

"—I see—"

"So that's how it was....."

After I finished explaining the whole story, the two Vice-Chairmen—Sophie and Tenor's fathers—muttered in voices thick with a mix of exhaustion and relief.

"I'll admit it," Vice-Chairman Kind started. He was Tenor's father, and the resemblance in his hair color and eyes was unmistakable. "I did indeed cast a spell on the children's base to create a Stone Golem."

A Stone Golem, roughly speaking, is a doll created by magic that moves according to orders, usually made from stone.

"It was supposed to stay merged with the ground and only transform into a humanoid shape when a password was spoken. Since I heard it was only supposed to be about the size of a person—"

"I did something similar," added Vice-Chairman Rheinbert, a man whose black hair was already starting to thin.

Despite the mess, Vice-Chairman Rheinbert casually brushed off his own responsibility. The other two nodded deeply in agreement.

"Indeed," Chairman Fritz said. "We can't have any accidents. Miss Lina, we would like to ask you to destroy the secret base, just as we originally requested."

Knowing the truth was making me lose my motivation by the second... "Ah, about that—"

Before I could answer, Vice-Chairman Kind cut in. "Actually, I already asked one of my subordinate mages to destroy the base. I heard the three of them were going shopping in town today, so I figured he could do it then—"

"Wait, what?" I said.

"But before I could even give Tenor the password, I heard the base had gained a will and turned into a giant fortress..... well, honestly, I panicked. It was only supposed to be twice the size of a person and follow basic 'walk' or 'stop' commands."

He was Sophie's father—and wow, I was just glad Sophie didn't look like him except for the hair color.

"The spell I used was a bit different," he added, though he didn't seem inclined to give details. Well, whatever.

"Wait a minute!" Vice-Chairman Rheinbert shouted, his face turning pale.

"Yes. Today—" Vice-Chairman Kind began, looking puzzled.

Rheinbert stood up from his chair, looking aghast. "Today?"

"What is it?" the Chairman asked.

With a ghostly white face, Rheinbert stammered, "I-it’s true my wife was supposed to take the three of them shopping today, but she suddenly came down with a fever! When I left the house this morning, she said the shopping trip was canceled...!"

If that was the case, the kids would—

"They'd go to the secret base!" Realizing the situation, I stood up.

The Chairman still looked confused, so I spelled it out for him. "It means your subordinate, the one you ordered to destroy the base, is going there *today*! He thinks the kids aren't there! The children are in danger!"

The gravity of the situation finally hit them, and the Chairman's face went pale.

"We're going! To the secret base!"

At my call, the three of them nodded without a moment's hesitation.

By the time we arrived, it was already over.

The mage ordered to destroy the base must have been a Stone Golem user. Crushed stone golems lay scattered everywhere like rubble. Standing right in the middle of it all was the Ultimate Secret Base: Seafood.

And there, tangled in its massive right foot by vines or tree roots, was a man in black robes, pinned like a specimen.

"Vice-Chairmen~ This guy is impossible~" the man sobbed. This must have been the mage they sent.

Either Kind hadn't explained things well, or this guy had seriously underestimated his opponent. Either way, trying to take on a "Seafood" big enough to trample a dragon with a few regular stone golems was never going to work.

"We heard everything from him!"

Tenor’s voice drifted down from far above us. I looked up to see a window open in the green core, with the children looking out. I didn't even need to see their faces to know they were furious; I could hear it in their voices.

"You ordered him to destroy our base! And since you came here together, you're all in on it! Dad, you idiot! I hate you!"

"Papa, you meanie—"

"I hate you guys!"

"Please! Do something!" the adults begged me.

"You're asking *me*?"

"—Lina-nee-chan, you're on their side too? I believed in you!" Tenor spat from above. "Fine! We've decided! The three of us are running away from home!"

"Running away?!" the three adults cried out in shock.

The kids ducked back inside the window.

"Is everyone ready?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

"Okay, Seafood, let's move."

『Understood.』

Following the four voices, Seafood lifted its massive leg and turned around. I don't know where they thought they were going, but the three adults were in a total panic, screaming uselessly at the giant.

"W-wait! It's not like that!"

"Uhm, well, you see, the thing is!"

"Wait, let's talk!"

Emotionally, I wanted to take the kids' side, but I couldn't exactly let them go like this.

"Seafood!" I bellowed at the top of my lungs. "Do you really think this is for the children's sake?"

The secret base stopped in its tracks. I decided to persuade the base first, rather than the emotional kids. If it were a normal golem, talking would be pointless, but Seafood had a will—it had its own judgment. It wouldn't want the children to be unhappy.

『For the children's sake, you ask? After they sent a man to attack me while the children were inside?』 Seafood gestured with its leg toward the weeping mage still tied to it.

"That man didn't know! He didn't know the shopping trip was canceled and that the kids were here!"

"—It's fine, Seafood! Let's go!" the kids shouted, trying to cut me off. "Don't listen to her!"

"You'd better listen if you care about their safety!" I countered.

As expected, Seafood responded to that. 『—What do you mean?』

"Think about it! No matter where you go, people from other towns aren't going to know the situation. To them, you're just a massive, unknown thing coming over the mountains. You'll run out of food, and if that town has an army, they'll mobilize and attack immediately! Even if that doesn't happen, what if the ground gives way while you're trekking through the mountains and you trip? You might be fine, but for the kids, it's the same as falling from that height! They won't walk away from that!"

『—Mmm.....!』

"We'll be fine!"

"Just go!"

"Seafood!"

Sensing Seafood's hesitation, the kids started shouting all at once, but I shut them down with one sentence.

"Your mothers will be sad!"

Silence fell.

"It's perfectly natural to be mad at your fathers for trying to destroy the base without telling you!"

"Hey...?" the Chairman and the others started to protest, but I ignored them.

"But that doesn't mean running away is the answer. It'll make your mothers sad, and like I said, wandering around will only lead to trouble! If you want to run away even if it means being hungry, making your mothers cry, getting Seafood attacked, and making everyone miserable—then I won't stop you! But if that's not what you want, there has to be another way!"

After a long silence, Tenor's voice came back. "......Fine, what 'other way'?"

"To find that, you need to understand why your fathers tried to have the base destroyed. That means you have to start by listening to what they have to say."

I turned to the Council members. "So, there you have it. You're going to explain yourselves properly, right?"

"......Fine," Tenor muttered.

As soon as I gave the signal, the three adults started babbling at once.

"I-I tried to stop them!"

"I didn't really want to do this either!"

"It's not my fault!"

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

I kicked all three of them down in order.

"You guys! These kids are being mature enough to listen, and you grown-ups start making 'it's not my fault' excuses like toddlers?! I know you don't want them to hate you, but whining like this is only going to make them hate you more! Now, explain it again, and do it right!"

Chastened, Vice-Chairman Kind finally spoke up properly. "The thing is... we've been getting complaints from the people who work in the mountains. When a giant secret base wanders around the forest, trees get knocked down and the animals get scared off. The charcoal burners and hunters are in trouble."

"But that's—"

"The hunters have families too," I said, cutting Tenor off. "Probably kids about your age. If the hunters can't do their jobs, those kids will be in trouble. Don't tell me you don't care about that."

Tenor was momentarily speechless. "Then... what are we supposed to do?"

"What do you all think is the best solution?" I asked back.

The children fell silent. To be honest, I was on the side of the kids and Seafood more than the old men. But it was a fact that Seafood's massive size was causing problems.

『Hmph. No need to fret. The answer is simple.』

It was Seafood who broke the silence.

"What are you going to do?"

『This.』

I watched as vines extended from the surrounding area, snaking into the core window. The ground beneath Seafood's feet crumbled instantly. "Wait...?" "Seafood?" "What are you doing?" the children cried out. Dust clouds billowed up thickly. I used the vines to entwine the children, pulling them out through the window. "Seafood!" "Why?" "No way!" they shouted. I lowered them slowly to the ground. At the same time, I released the stone doll-using mage who had been tied to Seafood's leg—the one everyone had completely forgotten about. The children's voices rose in something close to a scream. "You... you don't mean..." Shizu stammered.

Through the thick, rising dust, I saw Seafood's upper body sinking slowly. That massive form was collapsing, layer by layer, starting from the bottom. Yes. "Take these three and get back," Seafood had said, pushing the children toward me. A rumbling earth tremor and a grinding screech erupted—*gogogogogomi-shimi-shikishi!* It grew steadily more intense. I turned to the Council Chairman and the other adults. "Take the children and get away!" I barked. Sensing the situation immediately, the three adults moved at once.

The simple answer Seafood had reached was this: because its body was too enormous, it would erase its own existence, the very source of the commotion. I kept my distance while holding onto the children, who were dazed and unable to grasp what was happening. They struggled and resisted, but I certainly wasn't going to let go of them now. The freed golem-user also dashed away in a panic.

Eventually, after some time had passed, the rumbling stopped. The wind blowing across the mountain gradually carried the dust away. No one said a word. Once the view cleared, Seafood puffed out its chest toward me. *“If I worked hard, I can manage to make it happen!”* it seemed to boast. *“This shouldn't be a problem now, right?”* "Whoa! It shrunk!" the children shouted all at once.

Well, regardless of how it happened, now that things were like this, "So!" I looked toward the Chairman and the adult group. "With this, there’s no longer any need to destroy the secret base—Seafood—right?"

Of course, the adults didn't want the children to know that they were the ones who had created Seafood in the first place. That massive, overwhelming body was now just a bit larger than a stone doll, consisting of a green core with a tree-trunk body and stone limbs.

"Did it not... self-destruct?" the Chairman muttered, stunned. Seafood looked at him as if mocking him. *"Hmph. Foolish. Why should I have to do such a thing for you?"* "I mean... you could actually... get smaller..." the children whispered. I felt like saying something, but the adults likely feared being hated by the children more than anything else. "Ah, yes." "Of course." "Naturally," they replied without hesitation.

"Really!" "We won't destroy Seafood anymore!" "We can play forever!?"

"It’s true," the parents responded to the children. "Sorry. We were going to do something terrible without even talking to you." "Please forgive us."

"Good grief. It looks like this case is closed," I said, offering the final word. No one disputed me.

Of course—I noticed. The fact that Seafood worked hard to get small meant that, if it felt like it, it could return to its massive form—or perhaps even become something even larger. So, in truth, the problem hadn't really been solved at all! However, I was done dealing with these idiotic parents. Before the Chairman and the others noticed, I planned to say something appropriate, collect my fee, and leave town quickly. Looking up at the winter sky, I let my thoughts wander toward the reward I hadn't yet grasped.

(The Order to Destroy the Secret Base: Finished)

Looking for New Bonds

"Understood. I'll say something to them," I said, quickening my pace toward the back of the village. I recognized the man's face.

"Fa... Father and Mother... Orcs... Orcs are... this way..."

The village was in the middle of an uproar. I followed along, observing the man's square face and sturdy build. His beard was quite ragged, but there was no mistake. It was Aldous. I grasped the situation immediately.

I had stopped by this small mountain village while traveling, thinking it was about time for lunch. "So, what happened?" I asked.

"Seems like someone collapsed. Apparently, he's someone the village folks used to be indebted to," a villager replied.

"Mr. Aldous!" someone cried. "Just rest easy for now."

"I see," I muttered, giving a casual response while I thought. A while back, this man had consulted me, worried that his elderly parents were constantly doing dangerous things. However, from the moment I stepped in, the atmosphere wasn't exactly right for asking about good places to eat, with villagers running back and forth. Still, giving up on lunch and heading to the next village would take too much time.

In that case! I would ask about the situation and somehow naturally find out where the restaurant was! I immediately called out to a nearby villager—an older guy—and asked, "What happened? I'm a mage, as you can see. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Suggesting I could be of help was the key point. It made it easier to draw information out of people. The older man stopped and thought for a second. "You... can you use healing magic?"

"Simple spells, sure."

"Then come with me!"

My plan was to take the collapsed man to the inn, suggest he should eat something nutritious, and then research the best restaurants! Eventually, a crowd came into view.

"I've brought a mage! Apparently, she can use healing magic! Let us through!" At the man's call, the line of villagers parted.

There, slumped at the base of a tree, was a single man. His clothes were dirty and tattered, but they looked like they had originally been quite well-made. His messy hair hid his downward-facing face. "Hang in there! We're going to help you now!" someone encouraged. The man moved his face slightly.

"Huh?" I stopped in my tracks.

He was a merchant in the town of Clamussa, not far away. The villagers' talk of being indebted to him probably stemmed from that. While I heard the villagers whispering, "Do they know each other?", the man—Aldous—raised his face slowly, as if squeezing out his remaining strength.

".....Li..... Lina-san.....?"

He called my name. I walked over to him to check his condition. There were no major wounds, but he seemed terribly weakened. As I spoke to the villagers, Aldous squeezed out a raspy voice. When I leaned in, he spoke in fragments.

"For now, we need to let him rest somewhere quiet."

".....Wa..... Wait..... Please....."

When I agreed, he finally looked relieved and let his head hang again.

"Hey! Pull yourself together!" "Stay conscious!" "Calm down!"

I barked at the villagers, who were panicking as if they thought he had died. "He probably just lost consciousness because the tension broke! Everyone, take him to the inn and let him rest! I'll be along later."

"Later—where are you going?" someone asked.

"Just for a bit," I said vaguely. "By the way, did anyone see which way this man—Aldous—came from?"

Several villagers pointed toward the mountains at the back of the village. "He came stumbling from that direction..."

"Okay! Then please take him to the inn!" Without waiting for a reply, I headed toward the mountains. If my guess was right, then...

Zap! Before I had gone very far, the atmosphere of the mountain grew restless. *Dzubababababababaaaan!* Birds flew up from the treetops. They weren't wary of me, but of something else. I chanted a spell under my breath as I moved—and almost at the moment I finished, the bushes ahead rustled loudly and two shadows jumped out!

"Phew! That was quite something!"

"It’s heart-pounding, isn't it, Grandfather?"

An old man and an old woman. The two of them ran past me on my left and right, then noticed me.

"Oh?"

"Lina-san."

I didn't answer; I was timing my move. The green of the mountains spread before me. The rustling of the leaves grew louder. Now! I released the spell I had prepared!

"Wind Brid!"

The gusts of wind pierced and struck the grass, making a flashier sound than I expected. The rustling heading toward us stopped dead. After a hesitant pause, the sound of leaves hurried away.

Good. That should do it for now.

"Why are you in a place like this?"

I turned toward the voice. The old man and woman had stopped a short distance away to catch their breath. These two were also faces I knew. They were none other than the parents of Aldous, who had just collapsed. They were the very people he had been worried about because of their dangerous antics: his father, Lawson, and his mother, Martha.

From what Aldous had said earlier, I guessed that these two had gotten into trouble with orcs while Aldous was with them. Orcs—creatures that look like boar-men—live in

groups in mountains and forests. They're often treated as pests because they raid fields. They have enough intelligence to live in groups and use tools, and they seem to know that messing with humans leads to no good, so they rarely attack human villages or towns directly.

The fact that they were being chased by such creatures meant they had probably run into them in the mountains and gotten into some kind of trouble.

"I heard the story from Aldous, who collapsed back at the village," I told the two of them. Having guessed the situation from the words Aldous had managed to mutter, I had chased after the old couple and fired a warning shot at the orcs with an attack spell. Having realized they had come close to a human village, the orcs had come to their senses and turned back.

"You say Aldous collapsed?"

"Then, is our son safe?"

"He just fainted from exhaustion. The villagers should be letting him rest at the inn. Even so—" I let out a deep sigh and scratched my head, my voice full of exasperation. "Did you both forget what Aldous and I told you before?"

"......Before....."

"What we were told.....?"

The two of them blinked and looked at each other, then simultaneously clapped their hands and shouted, "Oh!"

"Because Aldous would be lonely by himself—"

"It was that thing about crossing the line between life and death together to deepen our bond, right?"

"I never said that! I told you to stop doing things that might involve other people in a huge disaster!"

".....Did she say that?"

"I wonder if she did?"

"I! Did! Even if I said it differently! If I hadn't been here this time, you would have charged into the village with a pack of orcs behind you! If that happened, it would be a huge mess!"

"Oh, well—"

"We didn't intend to involve the village—"

"I told you before! If things were okay just because you 'didn't intend' for them to happen, there wouldn't be accidents in the world! Or what!? Did you 'intend' to be chased by orcs or 'intend' for Aldous to get separated and collapse!?"

"......That’s uhm....."

"....."

The two of them were at a loss for words, as expected. I let out a small sigh and said, "Look, this isn't the place to talk. Anyway, we're going to Aldas's place. I’ll finish my lecture there." I started walking toward the village, and the two of them followed me reluctantly.

".....What do you think I should do... about those two?"

It was the only inn in the village. In the evening, after waking up from a nap to recover his strength, Aldas asked me that following his words of thanks after hearing the situation from me in his room. His parents were also in the room, but he didn't seem to mind—no, perhaps he asked precisely because they were there.

I sat on a chair in the room, crossed my arms, and groaned. It would have been easy to just abandon them and leave, as I had done before. However, I felt that Aldas’s life might actually be in danger if things continued like this. Besides, a certain method had occurred to me that hadn't come to mind last time.

"The desire to deepen family bonds isn't wrong in itself," I said. "But because the way they're going about it is wrong, the bonds with their family and others are falling apart. It’s the definition of putting the cart before the horse. If we leave them like this, someone’s going to end up dead."

Because the parties involved were right there, I spoke plainly. Furthermore, I provoked them with a tone of slight mockery. "—I mean, bonds that can't be deepened

without a thrill? It feels more like those bonds are already gone, and that's the only thing barely keeping you connected."

"W-What are you saying, Lina-san! That’s not true!"

"That's right! Between me and Grandpa, there is a deep, deeeep bond!"

"Then, it's just a matter of confirming that bond through a method other than thrills, right?"

".....That may be so, but..."

"A method other than that...?"

"I have an idea," I said, nodding firmly.

"So, that’s how it is. Do something about it. Thanks."

"Oh uhm..."

In response to my request, the man across the table let out an ambiguous, troubled murmur. He was a middle-aged man with a pale complexion, wearing a black cloak and something like a monocle, and sporting a mustache. The reason he was wearing a silk hat even though he was indoors was likely because it was his style. His eyes moved restlessly between me and the elderly couple standing behind me.

"Eh—? Even if you say 'do something'..."

"Oh? After talking down to me about what romance is and isn't, you can't even strengthen the bond of a couple who has been together for years? Hmm. I guess you don't really deserve to call yourself an envoy of the 'Love's Nest' marriage consultation office, then. Master Lex, the Romance Agent."

"I... I am not saying I cannot do it."

Even though he knew my words were a provocation, he had no choice but to answer that way. The Love's Nest was a marriage consultation office located on the outskirts of a town called Romance Highbreak. Although it was supposed to be a consultation office, in reality, it was an organization that mass-produced romance-obsessed fanatics. I had once helped a woman who wanted to leave the group. I met Master Lex at that time.

We were, so to speak, former enemies. I knew full well he'd be annoyed, but as the saying goes, 'fight fire with fire'—or in this case, use a weird romance cult to suppress a weird romance-loving elderly couple! Personally, I was hoping they'd both just exhaust each other and go down together.

"However, I am concerned that our romance curriculum may be a bit too stimulating for elderly people," Master Lex excused himself. However, his excuse had the opposite effect on the two of them.

"Did you hear that, Grandma? It's 'highly stimulating' ♪"

"It makes my heart pound, Grandpa ♪"

They actually looked happy.

Master Lex was practically radiating an aura of wanting to refuse, but of course, I wouldn't allow that.

"As I explained at first, their identities are certain. They both agree. They'll pay the membership fee. I'm not asking you to bring them some impossible marriage proposal; I just want to strengthen the bond between the two themselves. If you're refusing membership even with that, I'd like you to explain the reason clearly."

"—I am not saying I refuse. It is just that it would be regrettable for us to be told 'we didn't hear about this' later. Within our curriculum for aiming for the heights of romance, there are even those where one might lose their life—"

".....That doesn't sound like a romance curriculum anymore... Also! I think you understood from my explanation of the situation, but the heart-pounding through putting their lives in danger is a nuisance to those around them! So, no extreme situations!"

"Of course, I understand. We at Love's Nest have one hundred and eight 'Romance Techniques' prepared. Even if the extreme situation patterns are sealed, it is not a significant problem."

"Okay. Also, since I'm in a position where I was entrusted with the two of them by their son, I'm going to be present too. Got it?"

"Understood. Since that incident with you, there have been voices within the group suggesting we review our regulations. We have changed it so that mid-term

withdrawal is possible, and we are also considering improvements regarding observations and presence. I shall manage it at my discretion."

And so, I succeeded in squeezing the two troublesome people into this troublesome organization. After filling out various documents, Master Lex led us to the back of the building. There were several stairs leading to the basement, and we had just finished walking down one of them for a long time.

"It's here."

The sound of hard footsteps echoed in the dim light. I wondered how far we had gone down into the damp, stagnant air. Master Lex stopped, put his hand to his chin, and after a moment’s thought, reached for a door.

"Just to be safe, if you could sign a pledge that you will not breathe a word to anyone about what you see here, then let us begin."

"Got it. You two okay with that?"

"Of course."

"I'm looking forward to it."

When I asked, the old man and woman gave an immediate, enthusiastic reply. Beyond the door he opened was—

"Ooooh...!"

Our voices of wonder overlapped. Beyond the door was a town at night. There were several houses nearby, streetlights flickering here and there, and the moon and stars scattered in the sky. Of course, they weren't real. It was an artificial space built underground. I had heard that there was a romance training facility under Love's Nest; I guess this was one of them. The moon and stars were probably made of luminous moss or something. In reality, it probably wasn't that vast, but it used the darkness well to make it look wide. Looking back, the door we had just come through was painted with a night view of distant forests and mountains; once closed, it blended into the landscape. If I had been walking without knowing, it would have been difficult to notice a door was there.

To us, who were looking around, Master Lex gave a polite bow.

"Now then. First, I will have the two of you test a 'Forbidden Love' romance situation."

"Forbidden love!"

Again, our voices overlapped.

"Precisely. Two people who, by rights, must not love each other. Yet their hearts cannot be stopped. It is at such times that love burns most intensely."

The voices of admiration from me, Grandpa, and Grandma overlapped once more.

"I see. It makes sense in its own way. But if you're told 'don't open it' or 'don't look,' you want to do it. You're using that psychology, right? Still, what kind of setting are you going to use? Even if you say 'conflict between families,' it's not very convincing if they're at that age."

If they were a young couple, that might be the case, but these two were of a certain age. In fact, they were the ones who would be making the family rules. However, Master Lex showed no sign of agitation.

"That is easy. We simply make it an affair—an illicit love."

".....Even if you say affair..."

"We are a married couple, after all..."

"That is the point!"

Master Lex first pointed at Grandpa. "In other words, you have a wife and children. And—" he then pointed his finger at Grandma, "—you, on the other hand, have a husband and children. Therefore! If you two fall in love, that is a double affair!"

"I never thought of that!"

The two of them spoke in harmony while I muttered, "No, um... regardless of the 'idea,' it's not actually an affair..."

But I held back that retort and swallowed it. Whether something was wrong or not, as long as the two of them were satisfied, it was fine. It was better than them causing trouble for everyone around them.

Ignoring my mutterings, Master Lex continued. "Now, I will have you go to these two houses. In the night when the household is asleep, you will quietly sneak out of your

homes to enjoy a tryst. That is the situation. However, you are suspected by your respective husband and wife, and servants have been placed as watchers. Those acting as servants will, of course, be our staff, but they will seriously try to stop you."

As if matching his words, six people—a mix of men in butler outfits and women in maid outfits—stepped out from the shadows. Two teams, twelve people in total.

"...You're quite well-prepared."

"Speed is also our motto. I arranged it while you were signing the documents. Now then—"

He flipped his cloak with a theatrical flourish, bowed to Grandpa and Grandma, and said, "I wish you luck in seeing if you can slip past their eyes and meet."

"Alright. Let's do our best, Grandma."

"Let's meet again later, Grandpa."

The two of them were led by six staff members each, walked in different directions, and eventually disappeared into the darkness. Only Master Lex and I remained.

"Hmm. But it looks like observation and being present will be impossible like this."

"Not at all. Since many of our collaborators are well-versed in magic, it is easy to grasp the situation if we go to the Romance Command Room. Now, this way—"

Saying that, Master Lex turned on his heel and began walking into the depths of the darkness.

『Silver Cup Number 3, lost sight of target! How...!? They were right here until just now!』

『Bronze Sword Number 6, target still not found! It’s impossible! It's as if they vanished...!』

When Master Lex and I arrived at the so-called command room, it was already a whirlpool of shouting. In the room, which wasn't particularly large, were about ten staff members seated at desks. Their respective desks were equipped with several magical tools called Regulus Plates, which transmit voices to distant places. It was better equipped than some small sorcerers' guilds. As Master Lex had said, they likely

had many sorcerer collaborators. In the center of the room was a large table. On top of it were miniatures of about ten houses, and several staff members with grim faces were moving colored pieces here and there. They probably used this to track the positions of Grandpa and the others.

...However, even if the equipment was good, the atmosphere in the room was abnormal. All the staff members were on the verge of panic.

".....What is this?"

One of the staff members turned around at Master Lex's murmur and spoke in a reproachful tone. "Master Lex! Who are those two you brought!?"

"—What do you mean?"

To his confused question, the staff member shouted in a voice close to a scream, "They disappeared the moment the signal to start the situation was given!"

"Disappeared!?" Master Lex and I shouted in unison.

"What do you mean, disappeared?"

"Exactly what it sounds like—they were gone in the blink of an eye when we looked away! Both of them! Everyone is searching, but they haven't been found! This is the first time such a case has happened!"

".....Just what is going on...?"

At this unexpected turn of events, Master Lex's already pale face turned completely ashen. Beside him, I thought of a possibility and called out to him.

"Master Lex! Come here for a second!"

"What is it! Right now—"

"I might know where they are!"

"—Is that true?"

"It's just a 'maybe,' but follow me!"

I turned around and left through the door we had just entered. I heard Master Lex's footsteps following behind me. I retraced the path we had taken exactly, and

eventually arrived at the original spot where we had separated from Grandpa and Grandma. Even as I looked around the set that reproduced the town at night, there was no one around.

"—This is... but there is no one here," Master Lex muttered, looking around.

However, I raised my voice with confidence. "Okay! You two, that’s enough, come out!"

"—What did you say—?"

Before his skeptical words could finish, there was a click as a door opened.

"Oh. Is it over already?"

"It ended rather smoothly, didn't it?"

Grandpa and Grandma appeared, opening the door we had used to enter the basement!

That's right! The moment the situation started, the two of them had easily slipped past everyone's surveillance and escaped. Without any prior arrangement, they met up at this spot and had been hiding behind the door on the staircase side!

"Godlike skill...!" Master Lex staggered, whispering in shock.

"Wait a minute. Weren't you two captured by bandits before?"

At my retort, Grandma said bashfully, "......At that time, we were seeking thrills..."

"You were caught on purpose!?"

Could it be that these two—who had been chased by griffins and orcs until now—had been intentionally slacking off for the sake of thrills when they could have normally outrun them...? That thought crossed my mind. If they confirmed it, too many people would be sad, so I decided not to ask.

Grandpa said to the dazed Master Lex, "Well... I’m sorry, but we might not be suited for this course. To be honest, escaping was no trouble at all, and above all, the thought of it being an 'affair' just didn't sit right with us."

"We can't talk about it in detail, but we have an acquaintance who went through a lot of trouble because of an affair—"

Five days later.

"I say... I have a feeling this just isn't right," Grandpa said.

"I agree. Young people might enjoy this sort of thing, but for an old soul like me, it’s a bit much," Grandma added. "Even if you tell us to put our hearts into this situation..."

"Guh...! Impossible...!"

Upon hearing their words, Master Rex, who had been overseeing the proceedings, fell to his knees in despair, letting out a cry of defeat.

Grandma continued, "Well... if you actually had an acquaintance who met a terrible end in a situation like this, asking us to feel all 'lovey-dovey' is a tall order."

Master Rex, who had been standing there dazed and lost until a moment ago, suddenly burst into a fit of laughter. "Hah... Hahaha... Fuhahahahahaha!"

He stood up straight, flung his cloak back with a flourish, and shouted with a burning competitive fire, making a declaration that made little sense to the rest of us.

"It seems you have made us, the Romance Hive, truly serious! Very well! Then we shall teach you true love with every ounce of knowledge and technique we possess! It will be too late for regrets! Prepare yourselves!"

Since then, the Romance Hive—or rather, the "Nest of Love"—put the two of them through every imaginable romantic scenario. Star-crossed reunions after years apart, amnesia, incurable illnesses... but every single time, the two of them said it just didn't feel right.

If they were just complaining, I could have told them to shut up and just try it, but in their case, it was always something like: "A friend of ours actually went through that," or "A relative suffered in that exact situation," or in some cases, "We've already experienced that ourselves."

When they told him a scenario didn't fit based on actual life experience, there wasn't much Master Rex could say. The life experience of these two was terrifying.

Master Rex, sweating profusely while still on his knees, muttered, "...What is missing...? What on earth...? I've got it! We haven't tried Drills vs. Tentacles yet!"

"Calm down, you idiot!"

I had been staying quiet, hoping they'd all just exhaust each other, but I couldn't watch this train wreck anymore. I grabbed him by the collar and shook him back and forth.

"You're going in completely the wrong direction! Or rather, I feel like this whole 'Nest of Love' is headed the wrong way! There is no such genre of romance! Even if you want a situation they haven't experienced, it's pointless if it's something that could never happen! Seriously, have you ever thought about what kind of life someone would have to lead to end up in a situation like this?"

"That is, of course—"

Master Rex turned his gaze toward Grandpa and Grandma. They were on a set in the basement of the Romance Hive. It was a cafe terrace with lava flowing around it. Grandpa was holding a torch, wearing full-body armor with giant wings on the back, standing next to a fake frog the size of a dragon. Meanwhile, Grandma, with a horn growing out of her forehead like a figurehead, was boiling a creepy horror doll with growing hair in a giant pot along with some marshmallows.

"...Now that you mention it... it might be a little unnatural," Master Rex admitted.

"Where is the 'little'?! Which part?!" I yelled.

Just then...

"They say you never know what will happen in life..." Grandpa mused.

"I know for a fact *this* won't happen! This isn't even romance anymore!" I snapped.

"B-but... then, what else can I possibly do...?" Master Rex looked away, his confidence completely shattered. Of course, asking me wasn't going to help him.

"Master Rex, it seems you are struggling."

A man's voice suddenly rang out, and Master Rex snapped to attention as if he'd been electrocuted. The staff members of the Romance Hive also stood at rigid attention,

looking more terrified than respectful. The owner of the voice wasn't there; the sound was coming through a speaking tube or some magical tool.

"Who is that?" I asked, bewildered.

"He is the founder and ruler of this Romance Hive," Master Rex explained after swallowing hard. "I told you I was an agent, did I not? I am merely a servant. He is the Origin of Romance, the King of Love! A being I cannot even hope to reach!"

"What a lame title!" I blurted out.

"It is not lame! We call him that with infinite respect! The Love King!"

"Enough," a heavy voice silenced Master Rex's indignation. "Master Rex, if they have given you this much trouble, those two must be quite something. I shall step in myself."

"The Love King himself?! No! To trouble you with such a thing—"

"I wish to guide them directly," the voice insisted.

Master Rex bowed deeply, removing his silk hat. "As you wish..."

With a booming sound, a white light from above illuminated a corner of the set where Grandpa and Grandma were. A circular opening appeared in the ceiling, and a single figure descended. He wore white shoes, slacks, and a suit that reflected the light, illuminating the dim room. He was likely using levitation magic, and his pose was strangely stylized. He was a blonde man with handsome features, though his age was hard to pin down.

Master Rex and the staff fell to their knees in tears of joy as if welcoming a god. I had to admit the guy was good-looking, but their reaction was a bit much.

The man known as the Love King turned toward Grandpa and Grandma with an elegant gesture.

"Oh? Could it be... Chuck-kun? From the Fowler family?" Grandpa asked.

The King froze mid-motion.

"Oh my, it really is you. It's been a long time," Grandma said with a smile.

"M-M-Master McKinley?!" the King cried out in shock.

"Master?!" Master Rex and the staff screamed in unison.

"Wait, you guys know each other?" I asked.

The King looked back and forth between the two of them and us, his voice filled with excitement. "Yes! I met the McKinleys and learned the greatness of love! They are the ones who inspired me to create the Romance Hive! They are my masters!"

"Now, now, Chuck-kun, please stop with the 'Master' talk. It’s a bit embarrassing," Grandpa said.

"We're just old people," Grandma added modestly.

While everyone was getting emotional, I quietly turned on my heel. I decided it was time to head back to Aldous, the one who asked me to do something about his parents in the first place. I would tell him with full confidence: "It was impossible!"

Back at the Hive, the Love King was bowing to them. "I see now. Since it was you two, it makes sense that our techniques didn't work. I thought I had grown, but I still have a long way to go. If you wouldn't mind, please... tell us how the two of you have been deepening your bond lately!"

Master Rex and the others leaned in, their eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Well, it's not much of a story..." Grandpa began.

"I wonder if an old couple's talk will be of any use," Grandma chuckled.

And so, they began to talk.

Afterword:

And that's the end of "Slayers Smash" Volume 5, "In Search of New Bonds." Love... it's an eternal theme.

L: Wait! Saying we "depicted all forms of love" is an exaggeration! Can you even call the stories in this volume "love"?

Author: What are you saying? The word "love" was used constantly!

L: Just saying the word doesn't mean you got it right! I feel like something is fundamentally wrong here...

Author: By the way, the "Romance Hive" was originally modeled after the "Tiger's Cave" from Tiger Mask. I almost gave it a similar name, but it ended up looking way too suspicious, so I changed it. See? It's full of love!

L: I'm not even going to argue. I'll just go drink some tea and accept that I'll never understand the human heart.

Author: Speaking of tea, it's getting cold. Winter is coming. I have an announcement regarding New Year's cards... due to the earthquake earlier this year, we will be sending winter greeting cards instead of traditional New Year's cards.

L: I see... It's important not to forget, even if the news stops talking about it. Anyway, is this really the end of "Smash"?

Author: Technically, the stories serialized in Dragon Magazine end here. But who knows? It might pop up again somewhere.

L: Then what about my spin-off? Or the full-color comic?!

Author: There was no such promise!

L: Fine! Just keep writing! One volume a day!

Author: That's impossible! Anyway, until we meet again.

L: See ya!